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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SILENCE IN WALKER PERCY

BY

MARTIN FRIEDRICH ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
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The undersigned certify that that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **SILENCE IN WALKER PERCY** submitted by **MARTIN FRIEDRICH** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **MASTER OF ARTS**.

WGWatson

W.G. Watson, PhD

M.A. Ross, PhD

Francis Landy

F. Landy, DPhil

DATE: 9 October 1992

For Loretta

ABSTRACT

Walker Percy devoted most of his life to the study of language, to that uniquely human capacity of symbolization, naming and communicating. However, there is a basic paradox underlying his novels, namely that, while language is the best hope of humankind to understand itself and its predicament, it is also fundamentally limited and subject to devaluation. Percy's novels thus reveal an author moving toward and away from language. Critics have often analyzed this double movement as a function of the obliqueness, reticence and indirection of Percy's style, the ambivalence of his narrative point of view, or the difficulty of coming to terms with Percy's "voice." But critics have yet to deal with Walker Percy's use of silence (of which indirection, obliqueness, and reticence are but different aspects) as a feature of all of his novels, and in terms of what Percy himself considered to be the dual nature of language.

It is the argument of this examination of Percy's use of silence, that silence is as important in his novels as language, and therefore key to understanding both his fiction and his non-fiction. In each of Percy's novels, silence provides the occasion and continuance of intersubjective communication; it points to the limitations of art, literature and language; and it signifies the possibility of an ending and a new beginning. The introduction to this thesis discusses the importance of these three categories -- that is, the relationship of silence to intersubjectivity, to the limitations of language, and to endings and new beginnings -- and the following three chapters analyze Percy's novels in pairs, relating each pair to a different phase in Percy's writing career.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of the sense in which Percy's fiction may be seen as "religious," and with a brief examination of the state of Percy criticism and of the dangers of ignoring the religious aspect of his novels. Now that it is generally taken for granted that Percy's novels are part of the canon of our most serious literature, Percy criticism has become a kind of growth industry. And as Frank Kermode has said, this process of canonization and of institutionalization of criticism often entails a closed, conventional reading of an author, rather than the reading which Percy's novels continually require -- an openness to ambiguity and silence.

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Abbreviations of Primary Sources

M- The Moviegoer (1961)

LG- The Last Gentleman (1966)

LR- Love in the Ruins (1971)

MB- The Message in the Bottle (1975; essays)

L- Lancelot (1977)

SC- The Second Coming (1980)

Lost in the Cosmos (1983; fiction and non-fiction) - no abbreviation

Conversations- Conversations with Walker Percy (1985; interviews, eds. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer)

TS- The Thanatos Syndrome (1987)

Signposts- Signposts in a Strange Land (1991; essays, ed. Patrick Samway)

INTRODUCTION

> So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.
>
> Genesis 2:19 (RSV)

Walker Percy (1916 - 1990) devoted most of his life to the study of language, to that uniquely human capacity of symbolization, naming and communicating. His interest in language began in the early 1950's after the discovery that his second daughter, Ann, was deaf; so that by the time his first novel, *The Moviegoer,* was published in 1961, Percy had already published several scholarly essays on semiotics and linguistics. Most of these essays were eventually compiled in *The Message in the Bottle* (1975). The balance of his other essays, a large number of which are directly or indirectly about language, were published posthumously in *Signposts in a Strange Land* (1991).

The relationship between Percy's non-fiction and fiction, however, remains problematic for critics. Percy himself once said that his theory and his novels "have very little to do with each other ... God help us if a novelist was thinking in terms of theoretical linguistics when he was writing" (*Conversations*, 138). But this statement is followed in typical Percyan fashion by a reversal: Percy goes on to say that in his "admiration for the precision of language and the possibilities of [its] use and misuse" there is a connection between his non-fiction and his novels (138). This reversal illustrates a basic paradox underlying the work of Percy, namely that, while language is the best hope of humankind to understand itself and its predicament, it is also fundamentally limited and subject to devaluation.

Walker Percy's novels thus reveal an author moving toward and away from language. Critics have often analyzed this double movement as a function of the obliqueness, reticence and indirection of Percy's style, the ambivalence of his narrative point of view, or the difficulty in coming to terms with "Percy's voice."[1] Now that it is generally taken for granted that Percy's novels are part of "the canon of our most serious literature" (Crowley, 23). Percy criticism has become a kind of growth industry. But critics have yet to deal with Percy's use of silence (of which indirection, obliqueness, and reticence are but different aspects) as a feature of all of his novels, and in terms of what Percy himself considered to be the dual nature of language.

Perhaps the critics' reluctance to deal with silence in Walker Percy stems from the difficulty of actually speaking about silence. As one eminent literary critic put it, "how should speech justly convey the shape and vitality of silence?" (Steiner, 12) When one does make an effort to speak of silence, one is struck with the difficulty of defining it. Wayne C. Anderson complains about the diversity of critical opinion which allows silence to "mean anything from narrative obliqueness to deconstructive absence" (quoted in Auchard, 3). But as long as philosophers and writers as diverse as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre, George Steiner, John Cage, Max Picard, Ihab Hassan,[2] and Susan Sontag continue to write about silence, there is bound to be a certain amount of ambiguity. To note these authors is not to suggest that Percy's interest in silence is only part of what has generally been recognized as a relatively modern twentieth-century critical interest in silence -- it extends also to his interest in Kierkegaard and to the silences of biblical passages, such as the *Akedah* (Gen. 22) and the Dialogue of Peniel (Gen. 32. 23-33). For example, some of Percy's characters are likened to the biblical characters of Abraham and Jacob; and the progressions of Percy's protagonists often correspond to Kierkegaard's three stages of existence, each of which place a different value on silence.

It is in the nature of silence to elicit a multiplicity of definitions and responses. Thus, one may say that silence manifests itself within the text of the novel variously as gaps, lacunae, negation, nothingness; as secrecy and indirection,[3] reticence and indeterminacy, ambiguity and ambivalence. In *Silence in Henry James*, John Auchard states that silence is related to elements in a text which highlight "the vacant, the void, the blank, the dead," and marginalize "obvious statement, presences," and material things (3). Here the reader of Percy may be reminded of Percy's antipathy toward the materialistic consumer mentality; of Percy's dead fathers ("absences par excellence," as Auchard puts it [350]) come back to haunt their sons; and of what Percy called "the abyss" of our "unspeakable alienation," the "nothingness" of self.

When discussing Percy's use of silence, it is further possible to confine oneself to some degree to passages in which characters or setting are described as literally "silent."[4] For example, not only are Percy's fathers a figurative manifestation of silence as absence, they are also literally silent at times. It is also possible to narrow our definition of silence by examining its relation to language or utterance. In "The Aesthetics of Silence," Susan Sontag quotes John Cage's remark about the co-existence of sound and silence: "There is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound" (186). This is not to imply that silence is subordinate to sound or utterance. In his analysis of the ontological significance of silence, Bernard Dauenhauer provides the departure point for an analysis of Walker Percy's use of silence in his novels: silence is only in some instances subordinate to utterance (7) and in most cases co-existent and co-ordinate with utterance (5); silence "inaugurates, elaborates, and circumscribes" discourse (78).

It is the thesis of this examination of Percy's use of silence, that silence is as important in his novels as language, and therefore key to understanding both his fiction and his non-fiction. In each of Percy's novels, silence provides the occasion and continuance of intersubjective communication; it points to the limitations of art, literature and language; and it signifies the possibility of an ending and a new beginning.

Silence and Intersubjectivity

Walker Percy believed that language was the key to understanding humankind's predicament in the twentieth-century, a century in which scientific theory fails to tell us what it is to be an individual, and in which one is alienated from society and one's own self:

> What does a man do when he finds himself living after an age has ended and he can no longer understand himself because the theories of man of the former age no longer work and the theories of the new age are not yet known, for not even the name of the new age is known ...? (*MB*, 7)

Scientific theory fails to "name" our predicament because "science cannot utter a single word about an individual molecule, thing, or creature in so far as it is an individual but only in so far as it is like other individuals" (22). Traditional Judeo-Christian teaching no longer forms the basis of a consensus in society, so that one is left "like a child who sees everything in his new world, names everything ... except himself" (9). The denizen of the twentieth-century "lives in a cocoon of dead silence, in which no one can speak to him nor can he reply" (22).

One can "break into the daylight of language" (*MB*, 45) only through the process of symbolization or naming, which are always intersubjective acts: "*symbolization presupposes a triad of existents: I, the object, you*"; and naming is "an exercise in intersubjectivity" because it requires a namer and a hearer, an "I and a Thou," "co-conceivers ... of the object beheld under the auspices of a common symbol" (281, 271; italics in original). In his essay "The Man on the Train," Percy explains how literature through the process of symbolization and naming removes the alienation of writer/speaker and reader/auditor:

> There is a great deal of difference between an alienated commuter riding a train and this same commuter reading a book about an alienated commuter riding a train ... The nonreading commuter exists in true alienation, which is unspeakable [because he literally cannot name it or explain it]; the reading commuter rejoices in the speakability of his alienation and in the new triple alliance of himself, the alienated character, and the author. His mood is affirmatory and glad: Yes! that is how it is! -- which is an aesthetic reversal of alienation (*MB*, 83).

There is therefore "no such thing, strictly speaking, as a literature of alienation," because by naming alienation, by "re-presenting" it, the author establishes a vital relationship with the reader which reverses alienation. This is why, in Percy's humorous way of putting it, Jean-Paul Sartre, sitting in a French café and writing *Nausea*, was the happiest man in France. Modern literature is "the triumphant reversal of alienation through its re-presenting," and naming "the supreme intersubjective achievement of art." (93, 97).

Percy's theory of speaking the unspeakable goes a great way toward describing his fiction. First, it explains how Percy's particular kind of humor works. In an interview, Percy admitted that "nobody knows what is going on when you communicate the unspeakable. This all-important step from unspeakability to speakability is such a triumph that in his own exhilaration, the American writer finds it natural to use the Mark Twain tradition of ... the humorous" (*Conversations*, 77). Thus, the amnesic, runny-nosed protagonist of *The Last Gentleman* taking "great joyous ten-foot antelope brounds" in pursuit of a somewhat mentally unstable companion in an Edsel in the middle of the desert, is not only humorous -- it also reveals the seriousness of the need for intersubjective relationships.[5] Second, Percy's making speakable the unspeakable, in effect "telling someone something he already knows about himself, but does not know he knows" (*Conversations*, 9), explains the shocks of recognition that readers of Percy experience when reading his fiction. In Chapter Two we will see that we can sympathize with the protagonist of *Lancelot* despite his barbarity, partly because he is attempting (with varying degrees of sincerity) to render the unspeakable speakable, consciously to know what he already unconsciously knows.

Percy found a further way of engaging the reader in the intersubjective process of literature, and that way is, of course, through silence. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth reveals how authorial silence may take the form of a manipulation in narrative point-of-view which distances us from the protagonist of a novel and establishes a "secret communion" of author and reader "behind the hero's back," a relationship in which the author may "wink and nudge" but may not speak (300). This kind of silence is evident to varying degrees in each of Percy's novels, where we are always made to laugh at the odd goings-on of the protagonists; but it is especially conspicuous in the third-person narration of *The Last Gentleman* and the first-person narration of *Lancelot*. Frank Kermode, however, notes the limitations of attempting to decipher the complexities of authorial intention and point of view, and emphasizes instead the reader as a free agent and interpreter: "The reader is freely creative in the spaces between what the absent author has determined, in the 'indeterminacy gaps' ... A text with minimum indeterminacy is a boring text" (*The Art of Telling*, 128; cf. 112, 127). Percy creates this indeterminacy in his texts through his silences, which are always a measure of his respect for the writer-reader relationship. As George Steiner puts it:

> Respect for the reader signifies that the poet or novelist invites the consciousness of the reader to collaborate with his own in the act of presentment. He does not tell all because his work is not a primer for children or the retarded. He does not exhaust the possible

> responses of his reader's own imaginings, but delights in the fact that we fill in from our own lives ... the contours he has drawn (*Silence and Language*, 75).

Percy's use of silence thus may be differentiated from what Susan Sontag calls the "aggression" of the modern artist. In her essay "The Aesthetics of Silence," Sontag may be correct to some extent in her charge that the modern artist treats his audience as "voyeuristic spectators." She goes on to say that "art that is silent engenders a stare" and thereby "annihilates the perceiving subject" (184, 191). But Walker Percy's idea of a stare differs from the Sartrean notion of staring to which Sontag subscribes. Percy asserts that my shame at someone staring at me is not because I am made into an object: "What is revealed ... in the discovering look of another, is literally my *unspeakableness* (unformulability). To be taken for [an object] would be the purest happiness. No. I am exposed ... not as a something [but] as nothing ..." (*MB*, 185 - 86). Thus, a stare may even lead to an intersubjective moment in which two people escape their alienation from others by seeing their nothingness in one another: if "I fall from the I-thou to the I-it," says Percy, "there remains your stare, which may not be symbolized. If I am determined to dispose of you by formulation, I had better not look at you" (*Signposts*, 137).[6] In Percy's fiction, then, looking or other forms of non-verbal communication may form the basis of an intersubjective relationship.

Percy uses silence to initiate, continue and elaborate the intersubjective relationships of his characters, to the same extent that he uses silence to engage his reader in a cooperative and creative relationship. Bernard Dauenhauer's classifications of discourse and silences[7] may be a useful beginning point in a discussion of the progression of Percy's characters to an intersubjective level of discourse. Dauenhauer states that "artistic" silence not only "binds author and audience" (47), but that silence in general is always a "yielding, binding, and joining" to some other one or thing, whether it be to the past or to an intimate lover. By remaining silent "one acknowledges some center of significance of which he is not the source, a center to be wondered at, to be in awe of" (25). "Fore-silence" anticipates discourse by preparing for "a new saying or hearing" (11); "intervening silences" provide for the continuance of discourse and at times may be just as weighty as the utterances within discourse (7); and "after-silence" involves "the savoring or digesting of some discourse," and "allows a specific string of utterances to achieve its existential weight" (75). These different kinds of silences are seen most clearly in the most successful of Percy's relationships, that of Will and Allie in *The Second Coming;* but they are also seen in the other novels, such as in the revealing scene in *The Moviegoer* where Binx and Kate quietly talk in the upper part of the house while meaningless conversation takes place below.

Dauenhauer also points out that silences operate as transition stages between different levels of discourse. First, silence opens the way for the development of self by differentiating the self from the interminable "discourse" of perceptual experience. The danger of discourse at this self-ish level, however, is that it may degenerate into "prereflective chatter," or what Heidegger called "gossip" and "idle curiosity." It is only through another transitional silence that discourse becomes intersubjective (I-you). Dauenhauer asserts that dialogue as well as monologue takes place at this stage, because monologue also presupposes listeners who, to however minimal an extent, determine and participate in the discourse of the speaker. This view of monologue, as we will see in Chapter Two, allows us to see the anti-hero of *Lancelot* in a slightly different light than that of only a beastly, manipulative, selfish storyteller -- it allows one to see Lance and Percival's communication as an I-you discourse, if not a dialogue, and it therefore would allow for the silence of Percival to be interpreted in active terms. Dauenhauer also posits a third transitional silence which leads to a level of discourse beyond the I-you stage, and which involves a yielding of autonomy in intimate relationships for the sake of a deepening in the capacity for true communication (70 - 73).

These classifications of discourse and silence are similar to the silences of Kierkegaard's three stages of existence. At the lower end of Kierkegaard's first stage, the aesthetic sphere, an individual exists in pre-reflective immediacy, unable to speak or communicate in any meaningful way, because language presupposes reflection. At the other end of the aesthetic sphere individuals have the ability to reflect on themselves and their environment, and thus the ability to speak. Their silences are not necessary, but volitional. Percy's protagonists sometimes become trapped in a dialectic between these two poles of the aesthetic sphere, and thus their silences may be read as either a result of immediacy or of abstraction. In the ethical sphere, Kierkegaard's second stage of existence, the self is seen as part of the universal and opposes all forms of silence, regardless of their motivation, because silence is the negation of moral community. Percy follows Kierkegaard in asserting the need to transcend the universality of the ethical. Thus, Binx Bolling's silence when confronted by his aunt at the end of *The Moviegoer* is a tacit rejection of his aunt's ethical code. This is not to say Binx somehow transcends I-you discourse, for Percy never theorized explicitly about a realm of discourse beyond I-you intersubjectivity. It is perhaps more correct to say that Percy's protagonists exist at different times in all of Kierkegaard's stages. Binx, after all, bows to his aunt's ethics at the end of the novel by attending medical school. One could argue, however, that communication more proper to Kierkegaard's last stage, the religious sphere, takes place in Percy's "sacrament" scenes (for example, the communion scenes in *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*). The silences of this stage derive from the individual's relation with the absolute, which cannot be mediated by language because language always translates into the universal. The silences at certain points in Percy's fiction may thus be an acknowledgment of the limitations of language to descibe and explain some aspects of human existence.

So far the examination of silence in Walker Percy's fiction has been of silence as an almost totally positive phenomenon. In fact, Dauenhauer examines it solely in positive terms, whereas in Percy silence is also negative: it may be a means of obtaining or retaining power in relationships, or a sign of the inherent difficulty of human beings to communicate. Or it may be an indication of the limitations of language and art in general.

Silence and the limitations of art and language

In "The Man on the Train," Walker Percy described the artist's ability to reverse the reader's alienation through re-presenting his alienation and establishing intersubjectivity through symbolization. At the end of his essay, however, Percy implies that this re-presentation is only an "aesthetic reversal," that the artist is limited in his ability to effect "a true existential reversal" (*MB*, 99). The reversal of alienation one experiences through reading therefore may only be temporary. In his other essays Percy reminds his reader that we live in an unnamed age in which there is a "breakdown of consensus, of a common language, a shared discourse," an age in which "the evils are too vast and too close to be portrayed in the aesthetic mode" of novel-writing (*Signposts*, 157, 158). What the reader and author share in art is "not a consensus" based on scientific theory or religion, "but the possibility of a shared sense of a common predicament" (*Signposts*, 209). Art and literature may be "the only instruments we have for exploring the great gap in our knowing, in our knowing ourselves and how it stands between ourselves and others" (216). But what can the artist do when "names no longer discover being but conceal it under the hardened symbol" (135) -- in short, when signs no longer signify?

"The Message in the Bottle" is Percy's most sustained and explicit answer to this question. A person finds himself a castaway on an island on which the civilization's science, technology and culture are advanced, but on which signs of his origins and his predicament are ambiguous at best. This castaway may become a scientist or a member of the cultural community on the island, but he always feels like a homeless stranger. Every day he walks along the shore looking for a message in a bottle, for news from across the sea. The castaway finds several of these messages, but not all are "news." Some contain information that "can be arrived at anywhere by anyone and at any time," but others are genuine news in the sense of "expressing a contingent and nonrecurring event or state of affairs which ... is peculiarly relevant to the concrete predicament of the hearer of the news" (125, 126). The first kind of message, which can be arrived at anywhere, anytime, is part of the larger category "which the islander might well call 'science': in the broadest sense of knowing, the sense of the German word *Wissenschaft*," which includes art. The implication (even Percy's non-fiction is not without its ambiguity and irony) is that the artist/novelist is fundamentally limited to providing "aesthetic reversals" in which there may be shocks of recognition for the reader, but in which no "existential reversal" of the castaway's alienation is guaranteed. This interpretation is both reinforced and qualified by what Percy says elsewhere about his role as artist: "The most we could hope to do as artists ... is to point out certain home truths, that is, to say how it is for a certain man in a certain state ..." (*Conversations*, 279- 280). A novelist can thus describe "the concrete predicament of the hearer of the news," but he or she cannot explain the reader's predicament in terms of "a contingent or nonrecurring event or state of affairs" (for example, God revealing his law to the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai).

Percy further described the limitations of the artist by noting Kierkegaard's differentiation between a "genius" and an "apostle" (see Kiekegaard's essay, "The difference between a Genius and an Apostle"). The genius is the scientist who lives in the sphere of immanence, studying what is observable or universally recognizable. (Although it is not certain whether Kierkegaard would place the artist in the sphere of the immanent, Percy does.) The apostle, on the other hand, is Kierkegaard's knight of faith who lives in the sphere of transcendence, dealing in direct, unmediated terms with the absolute (see *Fear and Trembling*, 79 - 81). Whereas "the communication of the genius (the scientific message in the bottle) is in the sphere of immanence ... It is otherwise with the apostle. His message is in the sphere of transcendence and ... not even eternity can mediate it" (*MB*, 147). The message of the apostle will therefore be relevant to the particular predicament of the hearer of the news because of the "authority" of this transcendent relationship. But it will be a message full of silences.[8]

Percy has often and emphatically stated that he is not an apostle, that he has not the authority to "edify" (another Kierkegaardian term for the activity of the apostle); but his silences ultimately deal with apostles of one kind or another:

> ... in these times everyone is an apostle of sorts, ringing doorbells and bidding his neighbor to believe this and do that. In such times, when everyone is saying "Come!" it may be that the best way to say "Come!" is to remain silent. Sometimes silence itself is a "Come!" (*MB*, 148)

Words, the very tools of the novelist's trade, have become devalued and degraded, "worn smooth as poker chips" (*Conversations*, 242) through long use and abuse. The only alternative a writer may have, then, is to practise a kind of silent art.

These views on the devaluation of language are not uncommon among Percy's contemporaries, some of whom set up the same dialectic between immanence and transcendence found throughout Percy's fiction. This dialectic, however, must be distinguished from Kierkegaard's concepts of immanence and transcendence just discussed. Percy's use of the terms correspond more with Kierkegaard's prereflective/reflective differentiation at the aesthetic sphere. Since Percy believed that both scientists and artists operate in this sphere, both are apt to "transcend" the immediacy of their existence through their self-reflexive work. This is by no means a "religious" transcendence, but has more to do with the old Cartesian mind-body split, what Percy called the "angelism-bestialism" of humankind. The unreflective "consumer" of society, says Percy, merely satisfies his animal wants and needs. A scientist or artist, however, may transcend his or her animal existence, but always faces the problem of eventual "re-entry" (the scientist less so than the artist; see *Lost in the Cosmos*, 113 - 21).

An inherent problem of language, then, is that it may *abstract* one from the realm of concrete reality while staying within the sphere of the aesthetic. George Steiner describes this problem as he discusses the limitations of writing about the Holocaust:

> ... Because [the topic of the Holocaust] is mastered by the literary talent of the writer, because a narrative persona full of distinct rage and stylistic force interposes between the insane fact and the profoundly exciting order of the book, a certain unreality obtrudes. Where it is presented with such skill, intricate modulations affect the hideous truth. It becomes more graphic, more terribly defined, but also more acceptable ... We believe; yet do not believe intolerably, for we draw breath at the recognition of a literary device, of a stylistic stroke ... The aesthetic makes endurable (166).

The thesis of Steiner's book-length discussion of silence is that language and literature cannot convey the unspeakable; nor can they always act as humanizing agents to stem the spread of barbarism. As we shall see in Chapter Three, this is exactly the point of Percy's last novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, which synthesizes Percy's earlier thoughts on the limitation and abstraction of language in the words and silences of one character's recollections of Nazi Germany.

Susan Sontag also notes the inherent limitations of language and exposes the error of the artist's desire to transcend his medium. Discussing the "dialectic" between the immanence and transcendence of the artist's activity, Sontag shows his dilemma:

> The "spirit" seeking embodiment in art clashes with the "material" character of art itself ... the very concreteness of the artist's tools (and particularly in the case of language, their historicity) appears as a trap.... On the one hand, speech is both an immaterial medium ... and a human activity with an apparently essential stake in the project of transcendence, of moving beyond the singular and contingent.... On the other hand, language is the most impure, the most contaminated, the most exhausted of all the materials out of which art is

> made. This dual character of language -- its abstractness, and its "fallenness" in history -- serves as a microcosm of the unhappy character of the arts today (182, 189).

For Sontag, the artist's will to transcend is an essentially religious quest as modern art seeks to act as successor to religion (cf. 181 - 182). The modern artist is tempted by his "priestly aims" to transcend art through silence (185). Along with Sontag, Percy (as we have already seen) has condemned this religious impulse in the artist, stating the very immanence of the artist's work in the aesthetic sphere as disqualifications for such a transcendence.[9]

Yet in some of his novels Percy comes close to the "violence" and "aggression" which according to Sontag characterizes the method of the modern artist. "The exemplary modern artist's choice of silence," says Sontag, "is rarely carried to the point [where] he becomes literally silent. More typically, he continues speaking, but in a manner that his audience can't hear" (184). And just as "the narrative persona full of distinct rage" in Steiner abstracts himself and his audience from reality, so too may Percy's "rage." Percy himself has admitted more than once that a good deal of his energy as a novelist stems from "malice." As we will see in Chapter Two, this would seem to explain the indiscriminate satire of Percy's third novel (*Love in the Ruins*) and the mixture of silence and "ranting and raving" of the fourth (*Lancelot*). However, Percy's comments about the intersubjective role of the reader and text, and his wish always to maintain his reader's "sovereignty" (*Signposts*, 152), should prevent us from carrying this interpretation too far. An alternate interpretation of these two novels would be that Percy's "ranting and raving" (the quote is from the anti-hero of *Lancelot* and is directed at society in general) may be an ironic commentary on the interminable flow of words in our culture, a criticism of the "Come!" of the secular apostles of a mass-society. In this way language may act as its own corrective in Percy's fiction. Yet the co-existence of language with silence in each of Percy's novels (seen most dramatically in the monologue/dialogue of *Lancelot*) may finally point to the limitations of both. Silence may signify the ending of discourse as well as its new beginning.

Silence, beginnings and endings

In "Novel-Writing in an Apocalyptic Time," Walker Percy observes with a touch of humor that "when words get abused, cheapened, exhausted, worn thin as poker chips, the novelist is losing his only tools. Always in deep trouble, he is now in deeper trouble than usual" (*Signposts*, 161). "In times as these," Percy goes on," it is no wonder that the posture the novelist often finds natural is that of derision, mockery, subversion, and assault" (and here is where Sontag's disgruntled artist and Percy diverge) " -- to mock and subvert the words and symbols of the day in order that new words come into being or that old words be freshly minted" (161).

In Percy's fiction, an ending -- whether it be the ending of a novel or the death of a character or the apocalyptic ending of the world -- is always an opening to the possibility of a new beginning. The novelist's task is not to entertain or instruct or edify the reader; the novelist is "a scientist[10] who has come to the dead end of a traditional hypothesis which no longer accounts for the data at hand" (*Signposts*, 190). The efficacy of scientific and religious discourse to explain human nature has come to an end, "and it is the very nature of man which must be rediscovered and reexpressed in fresh language of a new poetry and fiction and theater" (190). Endings in Percy are always difficult in that they take the form of an ordeal; but unlike the aesthetic reversal of alienation offered by the novelist through the ordinary course of a narrative, ordeal offers "a true existential reversal" (*MB*, 99).

The beginnings of Percy's novels prepare us for this kind of reversal by creating what one critic has called an "anticipatory alertness" in the reader which prepares us for a "new saying" (Dauenhauer, 11). In a description of Dante's work, George Steiner points out this gift in the artist to "thrust forward into language unprecedented, into analogies and turns of statement which the [writer] himself discovers, which he had not known previously to lie within his grasp" (Steiner, 40). As we shall see in chapter one, this describes the opening of *The Moviegoer*, which creates an "anticipatory silence" by beginning three times and ending by means of ellipses. Through this opening Percy is hoping to overcome the degradation of language, to defeat "routine discourse in order to allow new expressions of the meaning of reality to be articulated" (Dauenhauer, 47). *The*

Moviegoer may be not only the first American novel to translate European existential philosophy into the sustained form of the novel, but from the beginning it also establishes Percy's unique "voice": laconic and indirect, sardonic and sparse, attributing meaning to both words and silences. Percy's style at times almost takes on that of religious discourse, with its eschatological sense of ending and new beginning. He never uses silence as an "ultimate" end (as Sontag's "priestly" writer does [183]) but as a means to regain speach, to find that "speech beyond silence" (Sontag, 192).

Through the openness of his beginnings and the ambiguity of his endings, Percy frames his narrative with silence (much the same way as James Agee frames his scenes with silence in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*); and he repeats and combines these silences through the ordeals in his novels, which are both a beginning and an end. Perhaps the contradictory critical opinion that Percy's endings have engendered is due to the fact that they are open to silence (they are silent as to the fate of the main characters) and open to the possibility of intersubjective discourse (Binx with Kate, Will with Sutter, Tom with Ellen, Will with Allie). In order to reach this kind of ending the characters must go through ordeal: the illness or death of another or one's own personal death, and the accompanying shock of recognizing the finitude of existence (Luschei, 42). Ordeal is also a recognition of the finitude of discourse according to Max Picard, who sums up the significance of the silences of beginnings and endings: "From its originary silence, discourse receives its originality, simplicity, and innocence. From death it receives its fragility, its incapacity to correspond perfectly to its referent, in short, its finitude" (paraphrased in Dauenhauer, 136). As we shall see in Chapter One, this is perhaps why, during his ordeal at Jamie's deathbed in *The Last Gentleman*, Will Barrett can literally interpret Jamie's words but misses the significance of them. Shortly after this scene, the novel ends with Will pursuing Sutter through the desert.

Percy's endings are thus a termination and a beginning. They are a termination of the potentially interminable discourse[11] of the novel and of the society it reflects, a recognition of "discourse's lack of total adequacy" (Dauenhauer, 75). Yet the silence of Percy's endings involves "the savoring and digesting of discourse," the integration of the concluded discourse into a "wellrounded synthesis"; it does not eliminate the possibility of subsequent discourse, but it "changes the sign" of all discourse by "allowing utterance to achieve its existential weight" (Dauenhauer, 12, 75). In Percy's own terms, his conclusions offer the reader sovereignty over existence through symbolization and naming; they bring to an end the newness of his novel's language while opening for the reader the possibility of finding "new names for being, and giving the old ones new meaning" (*Signposts*, 135).

As we shall see in the next three chapters, Walker Percy saw humankind in much the same way as Gabriel Marcel -- as *homo loquens*, man the talker; and as *homo viator*, man the wayfarer always "on the road." What Joseph Conrad once said of Henry James's endings thus could be said with justice of Walker Percy's endings: they give "the sense of life still going on." Ordeals, beginnings and endings are natural to man the wayfarer; they do not signify an end to speech, but a new speech for man the talker. In Percy's silences there is no sense of the "all-abysmal and all-unutterable" of which Henry James spoke. The potential for nihilism is not in the "void" and "abyss" of the self's "unspeakable nothingness" but in this nothingness seeking itself by itself -- through inauthentic speech, impersonations and consumption (*MB*, 283 - 84) -- and not through communication with others. Finally, the reader must keep in mind that the ambiguity engendered by Percy's silences is, in the words of Frank Kermode, "not a breach of contract" but an "enhancement of the reader's share" in the text (1983; 108).

NOTES - INTRODUCTION

1. Such criticism usually offers a general and useful approach to Percy's fiction while concentrating specifically on one or two of his novels. See especially the seminal articles of Lewis A. Lawson, "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications," and Simone Vauthier, "Narrative Triangulation in The Last Gentleman."

2. In The Dismemberment of Orpheus, Ihab Hassan provides what is probably the most sustained discussion of the use of silence in twentieth-century literature, but is content to confine himself to the avant-garde and surrealistic, and to define silence in wholly negative terms. For Percy, silence isn't always negative -- in fact, as we shall see, it may be mostly positive in its effects. Like Wittgenstein, Percy believed that silence is a window through which we see not darkness and void, but meaning and purpose (see Steiner, 21).

3. Bruce Stovel, in "Secrets, Silence, and Surprise in Pride and Prejudice," points out that secrecy and indirection are the necessary tools of the novelist, that "a storyteller's plot is built around a secret" and "narration ... proceeds by indirection" (85). Thus, in order to make the case that silence is more prevalent in Percy than in the work of other novelists and that his use of silence extends beyond the novelist's need to establish suspense by secrecy and indirection, one must look at the wide range of his figurative uses of silence (indirection, reticence, etc.) as well as his specific use of silence as silence.

4. If one were to do a rhetorical analysis of all of Percy's novels, simply noting how many times the words "silence" or "silent" are used, one would most likely find their occurrence much more numerous than other key words or concepts in Percy, such as "alienation," "catastrophe," or "love."

5. Percy subscribes to Kierkegaard's idea that humor is not the opposite of seriousness -- it is rather an element in "infinite resignation," the last point before one becomes truly "religious."

6. It seems that Sartre's notion of staring does show up in Percy's fiction, as when Allie talks about the terror of others' looks in The Second Coming. But it is clear that, in general, Percy follows Martin Buber's and Gabriel Marcel's ideas on intersubjectivity.

7. See Bernard Dauenhauer, Silence:The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance, chapter three.

8. These silences are especially relevant in a consideration of Percy's odd priest characters, who, despite their strangeness and reticence, nevertheless meet the qualifications of a "news bearer" (see MB, 133 - 36).

9. Yet for Percy the key to bridging the mind-body split in the human psyche is in language itself -- or more properly, in semiotics and linguistics. Speaking of the "gap" and the "malaise" produced by the separation of the arts and sciences, George Steiner pointed to linguistics as a future possibility of reconciliation (61, 64). At the time Steiner wrote these comments, Percy was busy working to strengthen the "bridge" between empiricism and existential and between body and mind (MB, 279; see 277 ff.).

10.. Walker Percy was a medical doctor before he contracted tuberculosis and was forced (not all too unwillingly) to turn to another profession. He remained committed to the "beauty" and "precision" of the scientific method, even in his novel-writing, which he said should be analogous to psychiatry in its diagnostic and cognitive aspects. See "The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science?" and "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise" in Signposts in a Strange Land.

11. The semiotician Husserl called this potentially interminable discourse the "and so forth." It is interesting that some of Percy's protagonists are fond of saying "and so forth" when they are weary of speaking.

CHAPTER ONE

New Beginnings:
The Moviegoer and *The Last Gentleman*

> Only the person who is essentialy capable of remaining silent is essentially capable of speaking.
> Soren Kierkegaard, A Literary Review

> After these things God tested Abraham ...
> Genesis 22:1 (RSV)

In 1962, Walker Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer*, won the American National Book Award, beating such notable works as Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*. Percy's second novel, *The Last Gentleman*, was published in 1966 and was short-listed for the same prize. In each novel, Percy describes a society in which language fails to capture "the thing as it is," in which names do not signify and people, places and things vanish into symbols. The denizens of this society have become alienated (from each other, from the landscape surrounding them, and even from their own bodies) because they have become "consumers" of language, content to let the "experts" of their technical society "teach and edify" them ("The Loss of the Creature", *MB*, 61). Their alienation is measured by the fact that, even though they live in the best of all worlds in which all their needs are met, they are bored and anxious; but even though they have been deprived of their very "title over being," their ability to name, they are not aware of their predicament. As the epigraph of *The Moviegoer* points out, this unawareness is what Kierkegaard called "despair."

The protagonists of *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, however, *are* more or less aware of their predicament and are (to varying extents) prepared to do something about it; they are Percy's castaways, who, like other heroes of the twentieth-century novel, "do not know who they are, where they come from, what to do, and [for whom] the signs on their island are ambiguous" (*Signposts*, 216). In his search for signs that signify, each character fails in the extent to which he searches for signs in himself; for the self can symbolize everything except itself:

> The one thing in the world which by its very nature is not susceptible of a stable symbolic transformation is *myself*! I, who symbolize the world in order to know it, am destined to remain forever unknown to myself. The self, that which symbolizes, will ... pervert its native

> project of being conscious of something else [by trying] to grasp itself as something (*MB*, 283).

The self is an "unspeakable nothingness," yet because "anything at all is more tolerable than the vacuum which I am," the self may attempt to formulate itself through various means: unauthentic speech, impersonations and roleplaying; and consumption of "things," to the end of "emptying out and a rendering nought by the very act of having" (284).

The silences of *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* operate against these formulations of self. The protagonists of these novels move toward intersubjectivity through silence; they are silent at times in recognition of the limitations of language; and they experience endings and new beginnings through silent ordeal.

The beginning of *The Moviegoer* illustrates that it is one of the first American novels[1] to sound like a European existentialist novel (Camus's *The Stranger*, to be specific; see Luschei, 16); for in the opening of his first novel Percy found his "voice," a peculiar blend of silence and speech. Critics have called it "spare," "economical," "utterly quiet and personal," "elliptical," "oblique" "elusive," "cunning": "This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch ... it is enough to scare the wits out of anyone, yet I confess I do not find the prospect altogether unpleasant." So begins and ends the first paragraph. The next two paragraphs are digressions, each beginning similarly ("I remember ...," "It reminds me ...") and each ending with an ellipsis ("Was that all I had to do? ..." "I have a new secretary, a girl name Sharon Kincaid ...."); but each tells a different story. As one critic points out, it is as if Percy is purposely beginning his story three times (Max Webb, 2); or, more precisely, it is as if he continues to begin it as the novel progresses. A few pages into the novel, after more digressions, the situation of the first sentence of the novel is taken up again: "This morning ..." (7). Here the protagonist, Binx Bolling, tells of an ordeal other than meeting his aunt, but similarly both pleasant and unpleasant. He remembers laying wounded in the Korean War:

> "This morning, for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possiblity of a search. I dreamed of the war ... of 1951 and the Orient. I remembered the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush. Everything is upside-down for

> me ... What are generally considered to be the best of times are for me the worst, and that worst of times was one of the best" (7).

Since the time Binx "came to himself," however, he has again lost himself in a society that threatens one's very identity or being. Binx describes himself as a "model citizen" who takes "pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards ... certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist" (4). Binx lives in an age where one's own name is dictated by "fashion" (5), and in which consumers have deferred to the "experts": "I subscribe to *Consumer Reports* and as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink" (4).

Binx's tone suggests that he is ironically detached from this consumer society. His awareness of the "everydayness" and "despair" of his world and of the possibility of the search sets him apart from others and gives him the status of "a castaway" (9, 10). At the same time Binx is all too willing to be defined by others' terms, to be named by other people: he is alternately nicknamed "Jack," "Jackie," "Trader Jack," "Brother Andy." His real name, John Bickerson Bolling, is used only once by Walter Wade, before he nicknames him "Binx" (31). This nicknaming is done with a certain disregard for the individual named, to the point where, at times, the person vanishes into the name. The meaning of the name of Binx's landlady, Mrs. Schexnaydre (one creative critic's reading of which is "she's nadir"), may be Percy's ironic revenge on those of us who are more apt to look for what an individual "stands for" than who the individual is.[2] Mrs. Schexnaydre is simply an isolated, lonely, fearful old lady, a member of a society in which "most people have no one to talk to, no one, that is, who really wants to listen." Binx listens to people (including Mrs. Schexnaydre), he says, for "selfish" reasons: "If I did not talk to [them] I should be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking" (64; cf. 65 - 66).

Binx is fully aware, then, that the language of his age affects one's being -- one's ability to participate in the intersubjective processes of naming and symbolization -- by turning communication into cliché and convention. The bland names of many of Percy's characters are indicative of their conventionality: Walter Wade, Lyell Lovell, Nell Lovell, Merle Mink. Binx records a conversation with Nell Lovell, part of which shows the irreverent humor and indirection with which Percy deals with clichė in *The Moviegoer*. Nell Lovell has just communicated to Binx her desire "To make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off." Binx simply responds: "'Yes.'" And then in an aside to the reader: "A rumble has commenced in my descending bowel, heralding a tremendous defecation." Nell goes on talking in clichė about values, during which Binx humorously "shifts around" and watches her "in a general sort of way." And then with all humor suddenly put aside, he thinks, "Yes, true. Values. Very good. And then I can't help wondering to myself: why does she talk as if she were dead?" (88)[3] Binx lives in an age where even truth, goodness, and belief -- especially truth, goodness and belief -- are clichė. The radio program "This I Believe," on which "thoughtful and intelligent people ... with inquiring minds state their personal credos," is the most obvious critique of clichė in the novel. "Everyone on 'This I Believe,'" says Binx, "believes in the uniqueness and the dignity of the individual. I have noticed, however, that the believers are far from unique themselves, are in fact like peas in a pod." He sends a tape to the program which states "'Here are the beliefs of John Bickerson Bolling ... I believe in a good kick in the ass. This --- I believe." Soon after, however, he regrets sending it and listens faithfully to the program (95).

Binx Bolling thus distances himself from society, in a sense, by parodying it and naming himself against it, while at the same time remaining very much a part of society; but it is what Binx *doesn't* say that sets him apart from the deterioration of the language of his day. Kate's fiancė Walter Wade, with his "wolfish" smile, his "sour-senseless way of talking," and his compulsion to nickname people, has an ironic relationship with Binx. Walter wants "an intimacy beyond words," while Binx says, "The fact is we have very little to say to each other. There is only this thick sympathetic silence" (33). Binx has also become suspicious of his "old way of talking" with his aunt (39). Aunt Emily is fond of roles ("My aunt likes to say she is an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice") and of placing people in roles. For her, Binx must be "a proper Bolling" whose "duty" it would be to go to medical school (36, 45). Despite himself, Binx sometimes finds himself speaking in his aunt's "Socratic manner," but resists his aunt's influence when she literally dictates what he will say (26, 35). Nevertheless, her influence is so strong "that sometimes the person and the past are in fact transfigured by her" (41). On one occasion, Binx takes one of the photographs from the mantel in his aunt's house "to protect" himself against the transforming power of his aunt's words. Although Binx does not say with which picture he wards off his aunt, it is probably the one he is most fond of, the one of his father silently looking out at Binx with ironical eyes (20; 40). Binx's dead father is a vital element in his search because he may give back to Binx the power of naming: "Any doings of my father, even his signature, is [sic] in the nature of a clue in my search" (61).[4]

Significantly, Binx's mother, the person from whom he could learn the most about his father, distorts his father's memory by her manner of speaking about him. Binx has a long conversation with his mother about his father in a chapter that begins with the silence of a lake scene suddenly broken by a boat motor, and ends with a silence so intense that Binx "can hear the gristle creak" in an egret's wings.[5] During this conversation he realizes that "It is not him she remembers but an old emblem of him" (133 - 34; cf. 129 - 140). The memory of her deceased husband has become conventionalized to such a point that it is reduced to an emblem, a mere symbol of an individual's entire life.

Against such conventionalization, Binx speaks in guarded language about his search. He tells us that the possibility of a search first occurred to him when he "came to himself" as he silently lay wounded in the Korean War. The experience of an ordeal, of the possibility that one's life may soon come to an end, is thus the beginning of the idea of a search, and it always involves the recovery of the "inexhaustibility" of "the thing as it is" (*MB*, 60): "Six inches from my nose," relates Binx, "a dung beetle was scratching around under leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an intense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search. Naturally, as soon as I recovered and got home, I forgot all about it" (7). Binx must be reminded continually of this ordeal in order actually to undertake the search. His search is in a sense a series of beginnings. Section Two of the novel thus begins in much the same way as Section One: "Again this morning the dream of war ..." (after which the third ellipsis at the start of the novel, the one regarding his secretary Sharon, is filled in). Throughout the novel there are reminders of the beginning of the idea of a search (cf. 55, 72, 127, 138 - 39) which cause Binx to resume it.

Of the object of the search Binx is more reticent. At one point he engages the reader in a kind of dialogue:

> What do you seek -- God? you ask with a smile.
> I hesitate to answer ... (10).

His scientific search, what Binx calls a "vertical search," came to an end when he realized that science could explain everything except what it is to be an individual, that "though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over" (60; this is a paraphrase of Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel). After this, Binx undertakes a "horizontal search" -- he becomes a "wanderer" in "exile" (60; 14). "I am Jewish by instinct," he says. "We share the same exile" (77).

This is not to say Binx is a "believer": "My unbelief was invincible from the beginning. I could never make head or tail of God. The proofs of God's existence may have been true for all I know, but it didn't make the slightest difference" (128). Binx's only belief, we remember, is in "a good kick in the ass." "Yet," he says shortly after his profession of unbelief, "it is impossible to rule God out." It is impossible because the signs of his age have become ambiguous: "Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference. Is this God's ironic revenge? But I am onto him" (128 - 29). Here it seems the reader is being asked to become a reader of ambiguous signs -- those of the text itself: Is Binx "onto" God like he is "onto" his search? Is Binx's search a search for God? If so, why does Binx refer to his "invincible unbelief"? Is this Binx's "ironic revenge" on his reader?

It does seem as though Binx has an ironic ambivalence toward the act of writing as a mode of communication. The whole of Chapter Five in Section Two is implicitly dedicated to a discussion of the act of writing. First, Binx seems to parody a certain romantic/impressionistic style of writing. As he watches children march into school, girls in conventional blue skirts and boys in khaki, Binx records:

> The morning sunlight winks on the polished metal of ocean wave and the jungle gym. How shiny and strong and well-set are the steel pipes, polished to silver by thousands of little blue-skirted and khaki-clad butts (75).

Next, Binx remembers with some embarrassment the "long, sensitive and articulate letters" he wrote to his aunt about his "impressions" of the Orient, and quotes a short passage about "rhododendron blossoms" that reads almost like the passage above (without the direct parody). Then Binx quotes a passage from the notebook in which he keeps thoughts about his "search." It speaks about the connection between romanticism and science, but does not seem to be a parody. What is significant about the passage is that it shows Binx's reluctance actually to write about his search -- it is only one of two such quotes recorded in the novel (the other one being the "ironic revenge" passage quoted above. Of course, the entire novel is in a sense an account "written" by Binx.) Lastly, Binx actually attempts to write a telegram to a friend, but finds it insincere. The chapter ends with the words "Tear it up."

Thus, the first-person narrator of *The Moviegoer* self-reflexively writes about the problems of the artist/writer, and his ironic detachment from the act of writing reflects the somewhat self-centered detachment with which he undertakes his search. In two separate interviews, Percy stated that Binx's horizontal search takes place in what Kierkegaard would call the "aesthetic" mode, and that Binx's self-centered way of searching is like Kierkegaard's "aesthetic damnation" (*Conversations*, 114, 66). As long as Binx remains in the aesthetic sphere, he is destined to seek a way out of his predicament by engaging in what Percy called "the two obvious alternatives or deliverances from alienation" (*MB*, 86) -- rotation and repetition[6] (for example, moviegoing, dating a succession of girls, taking a ferry to Algiers, etc.). Binx, however, must "surrender the self as a locus of experience and possibility" in order truly to escape his alienation. In other words, he must experience an "existential repetition" rather than an "aesthetic repetition" (*MB*, 95), and this can take place only through ordeal. As we have seen, though, Binx must constantly be reminded of his original ordeal and the possibility of a search. His almost unconscious impersonations of others' manners of speaking and his role-playing of actors whom he admires show that Binx is only willing to undertake the search with himself as the "locus of experience." Ironically, this self is an "unspeakable nothingness" which is filled by other people's names and ways of talking and behaving.

Since he limits himself to the aesthetic sphere, and must necessarily do so as the ostensible writer/narrator, Binx's writing necessarily will be limited when he speaks of his search in relation to things outside the aesthetic sphere. For example, this is Binx's definition of repetition:

> ... the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle (69).

This must be the most convoluted and confusing sentence in the novel, and is certainly not like Binx's economical style (or like Percy's definition of repetition in his non-fiction [see note 6 and *MB*, 86]). That Binx intended it to be confusing and convoluted is indicated again, it seems, by the odd analogy with peanut brittle that deflates the sentence in the same way as the "khaki-clad butts" at the end of the schoolyard scene previously quoted. However, in an age where, as Binx says, "I have only to hear the *word* God and a curtain comes down in my head" (128; my italics), perhaps whatever Binx has to say about his search will run the risk of sounding as bland as the dust jackets of Sam Yerger's novels about "the essential loneliness of man" and the need for "tolerance and understanding" (148, 149). As a narrator/writer, Binx is stuck in Kierkegaard's category of the "genius,"[7] which for Percy referred to both scientists and artists. But Binx is "a genius whom ordinary professions can't satisfy" (43); he has completed his vertical search and has found that science cannot explain the individual, that he cannot escape his alienation through his aesthetic/artistic horizontal search. Binx is caught somewhere between the vertical and the horizontal, between the objective and the subjective, and between communicating with others and undertaking his exploits of rotation and repetition.

There are two characters with whom Binx communicates in an intersubjective sense -- Lonnie and Kate. Lonnie is the quiet suffering child-figure who will recur throughout Percy's fiction. He is Kierkegaard's knight of faith -- even his ordinary way of talking bears "the peculiar idiom of the catechism." His bland "monotonous speech" is unlike others' because "his words are not worn out. It is like a code tapped through a wall" (143; this image will come up again in *Lancelot*). And, unlike others' stares -- the passers-by staring at Binx's car accident, the looks of Aunt Emily and Aunt Edna (110; 22, 156) -- Lonnie's stare "holds converse, has its sentences and periods" (143).[8] The two half-brothers' silences are what Dauenhauer would call the silence of intimates (see 17 - 18), for Lonnie and Binx not only profess their love in words but in the "lively converse" of "looking, looking away, and looking again" (*M*, 144).

The communication between Binx and Kate is more complex than this; even though their silences are the silences of intimates, they do not always indicate intersubjective communication. Binx and Kate are much alike (Binx says at one point, "she could be I myself" [202]), although Binx's "dialectic" between the objective and subjective are not as pronounced as Kate's (37 - 39). Like Binx, Kate is given to abstraction and reflection, objectivizing others "in a kind of droning scientific voice" to which Binx listens in "the camaraderie of a science which is not too objective to pity the follies and ignorance of the world" (37). Like Binx, she also engages in role playing, which is, as one writer puts it, simply "living the cliché" (Luschei, 26); but unlike Binx, Kate is much more the helpless victim of others casting her in roles. When we are first introduced to her, Kate's silence is an ominous indication of the extent to which others, such as her stepmother Emily, control her life. She is at the dinner table with her fiancé, Walter Wade, whom she does not love but feels bound to marry. Her "frowning," "looking," "watching," "gazing" are signals of her unhappiness with Wade's "carnivorous" conversation (he is, after all, "sharklike" and "wolfish") -- signals which her stepmother "strangely misses" (26 - 27). She finally leaves the table uttering " a clicking sound in her teeth," and when Binx comes to see her shortly afterward, Kate "forms a soundless word with her lips," probably one of pain and desperation (35). Despite her efforts to hide her moods, Binx can always "read" the meanings of both her silences and her speech.

The extent to which they share a way of communicating which is essentially different from the vapidity and coercion of the conversation of others, is beautifully shown in another dinner scene towards the end of the novel (154 ff.). Here Binx and Kate are sequestered from the company in the mezzanine above the dining room. They sit like "theater goers" watching the "taboos" and "rites" of the conversation at the dinner table, while they themselves converse as intimates. At one point in their conversation, Kate alludes to Sartre when she says "Hell couldn't be fire -- there are worse things than fire." Sartre, of course, once wrote that hell is other people.

Binx and Kate, however, do not share completely open communication: there are things that they *cannot* say to each other. They have an unwritten rule, for example, that they not speak to one another in the movie theater. Although they communicate through "looks," this does not entail complete understanding: "She understands my moviegoing," says Binx, "but in her own antic fashion" (53). Later, when Kate asks Binx about his search he remains silent, telling only the reader that she is bound to misunderstand it (70). Kate then unconciously and interestingly alludes to what Binx himself says about his search: "It is possible," she tells Binx, "that you are overlooking something, the most obvious thing of all. And you would not know if you fell over it."[9] But to Binx's query as to what this something might be, she too is silent (72). Kate's silence may stem from the same reasons Binx remains silent: he does not wish to be misunderstood, the words seem somehow "absurd" (46), and he is too caught up in himself to know what or how to communicate the words. But Kate's silence also may be an indication of a deep-seated psychological problem -- the problem of "finding herself," which is horror in comparison to Binx's antic search. Her realization that her "self" may in fact be a nothingness, that her silence about herself may be because her self is unspeakable, comes over Kate like a flood at one point:

> How good to think that ... if I am silent, it means I am hiding something. How happy I would be to be hiding something ... But what if there is nothing? That is what I've been afraid of until now -- being found out to be concealing nothing at all (100).

Binx and Kate must recover their individual selves not alone, but together, through a shared ordeal. This takes place on their train trip to Chicago, on which Kate becomes a "Rachel" to the wanderer exile Binx (181). As Percy explains in "The Man on the Train" (*MB*, 83-100) train travel is symbolic in his work of an individual's alienation. And since this trip reminds Binx of his train ride home from the Korean War, it is a repetition for him -- but not a pleasant one: he is leaving this relatively safe life in Gentilly possibly to become "an anyone, anywhere." The train ride thus threatens his sense of being, as well as that of Kate, who is not as psychologically stable as Binx in the first place. Shortly into the train ride, Binx says that his search has spoiled the pleasure of his "tidy and ingenious life in Gentilly" (168); but he now has little time to think of himself as Kate nears the verge of an anxiety attack. Binx must name her to help save her; he introduces her to some acquaintances using her full name, Kate Cutrer, and thus helps bring her to herself, in a manner of speaking (163). Binx becomes Kierkegaard's man of faith, risking Kate's life by taking her on the journey with him, and at "every instant seeing the sword hanging over the head of the beloved" (*Fear and Trembling*, 52). Yet Kate is no Isaac -- she will not be sacrificed willingly. She is like Binx a seeker of signs, and in an unusual turn of events she places her faith in him: "What I want is to believe in someone completely and then do what he wants me to do ... You can do it because you are not religious. God is not religious. You are the unmoved mover" (173).[10] As one critic puts it, the seeker of signs becomes the sign (Webb, 20). Perhaps this passage is again Percy's "ironic revenge" on the reader, who, like Binx and Kate, compulsively seeks for signs when all the while the signs are before him -- in others. The reader, however, is probably only scandalized at the notion that the narrator/author is God, while all the while placing faith in this same narrator/author's ability to render an accurate account of reality.

Perhaps the most clear textual indication that Binx has after this point in the novel entered Kierkegaard's religious stage[11] is his strange silence at the ending. Binx has moved from the reflective, volitional silence of the aesthetic sphere to the necessary silence of the religious sphere (see Taylor, 1981; 167, 183). When his aunt's voice comes over the telephone demanding to know why he took Kate along with him in her mental state and without telling anyone, Binx is "silent" (186); and when Binx faces the wrath of her terrible Southern stoical ethic[12] in person, he again remains silent (197 - 98). "There is nothing for me to say," he simply states to the reader (after which he records that his aunt punishes him by withholding his name [198]). Indeed, there is nothing to say because Aunt Emily operates in Kierkegaard's ethical stage, where one is guided by the universality of moral law (in Emily's case, Southern Stoicism); and morality presupposes the communicability of moral decisions to others (Taylor, 1981; 179 - 80). But in the religious stage, the individual has a direct, private, immediate relation to the absolute, unmediated by language because language always translates into universality -- it is "impotent to capture the moment of faith" (Taylor, 1981; 184).

Binx's ordeal, however, is not over after his meeting with his aunt. He suffers greatly as a result of his aunt's tongue lashing, and embarks on a long diatribe (his "century of merde" speech [199 - 200]) which is the opposite of his previous silence and which concludes, "Whenever I take leave of my aunt after one of her serious talks, I have to find a girl." For Binx, his beloved is lost; his aunt, he is sure, will stand in the way of any more communication with Kate. But Kate returns to meet Binx and, in faith, he introduces her to another girl as "my fiancée, Kate Cutrer" (203). Almost immediately thereafter, Binx says he has found his vocation: to "listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons" (204; cf. 64).[13] Binx sees the possibility of coming to one's self through communicating with others; at the same time, in his renewed intimacy with Kate, he renews his periodic silence (205), and in a kind of silent ritual of communion kisses the blood on her thumb (205). The suffering of his ordeal has brought him close to an end: upon Kate's return Binx confesses that "For a long time I have secretly hoped for the end of the world ... after [which] the few who survive discover themselves to be themselves and live as merry as children among the viny ruins" (202). Kate's return marks the end of an ordeal and the possibility of a new beginning.

Binx and Kate's new beginning, however, still means that it is "impossible to say" some things (206). "As for my search," Binx concludes,

> I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any way other than edifying. For another thing, it is not open to me even to be edifying, since the time is later than his, much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself -- if indeed ass kicking is properly distinguished from edification (208).[14]

The novel thus ends in muteness as well as dialogue,[15] with Binx and Kate talking as well as walking "in silence" (209). The ordeal of Lonnie brings the sense of an ending -- after all, "the time is late" -- and also a sense of new beginnings, with the "merry children" foretold in a previous passage (above, 202) playing the "game of serious talk and serious listening" (210), as Binx and

Lonnie used to play (144), and like the children in so many Percy illustrations who begin to learn how to name for the first time. It is fitting that the novel should end with the children's calls.

Like *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman* is about a society which has somehow lost the ability to communicate intersubjectively, in which individuals have become alienated from themselves and others through consumership, role-playing and cliché. Of course, by the time Percy wrote about "intersubjectivity," "alienation," and "consumership," the terms themselves had become cliché. Percy realized this and consciously worked at either reviving or discarding the corrupted words (for example, he rarely if ever used the word "intersubjectivity" in his novels). He once said that he thought "the whole subject of alienation [had] become exaggerated and overdone ... A good bit of *The Last Gentleman* and *The Moviegoer* [has] to do with the positive values and beauties of the very things that are made fun of in so much of alienated literature" (*Conversations*, 28). The "positive values and beauties" Percy referred to are what he at another time called "the goodness and gratuitousness of created being" -- the simplicity of a desert landscape, for example, or the feel of iron and bark against one's hand -- and the possiblity of communicating this "goodness" to others (*Signposts*, 221; see *LG*, 261, 280).

Here, it seems, Percy is again in danger of slipping into cliché; but the way in which he uses silence rescues the language of his novels from overused and worn out words. What differentiates Percy's novels from the conventional novel of alienation about an unhappy young man living in a conventional suburb -- and even from the great literature of alienation such as Sartre's *Nausea* (a novel which Percy greatly admired) -- is Percy's ability to recover "the thing as it is," to establish the I-object-you relation for his reader. Percy does this, again, through his words and his silences, which signal the possibility of an ending and a new beginning.[16]

The beginning of *The Last Gentleman* takes shape in much the same way as that of *The Moviegoer*. Percy's use of indefinite articles and generic and unfixed adjectives indicates not only his protagonist's unstable sense of identity, but also his hero's openness to "possibilities": "One fine day in early summer a young man lay thinking in a Central Park." This young man is "an unusual young man" because he "attaches significance" to the seemingly "insignificant" (1). Thus, when in a chance movement he swings his telescope over and sees a woman sitting on a park bench, reading a tabloid with the seemingly insignificant words "parley fails" on it, Percy's hero immediately falls in love and sees great possibilities: "It would be possible to sit on a bench and eat a peanut butter sandwich with her and say not a word" (2, 4). The rest of the first section of the novel is a digression from the beginning, and fills in some of the "gaps" in this young man's life (8). Like *The Moviegoer*, however, the situation at the beginning of the novel is taken up once again in Section Two, where we are told that seeing the young woman was indeed a "sign" (32). In a society where "parley fails," Percy's protagonist has an ironic ability to attach significance to (i.e. to read the "signs" of) events and words which have lost their meaning.[17] This gift of "seeing things afresh" is ironic because he is at the same time a participant in the degradation of language and a victim of "unspeakable" and "nameless spells" of amnesia (7).

Like Binx, the protagonist of *The Last Gentleman* has an ironically detached relationship with society; but at the same time he is better off and worse off than Binx. Whereas Binx dwelt in what Kierkegaard called "aesthetic damnation," Percy's hero here undergoes rotation and repetition (his fugues of amnesia, for example, and his travelling back home to the South) in a more serious way because he is truly sick (see *Conversations*, 66 - 67). Like John Bickerson Bolling, Williston Bibb Barrett (I will call him Will) has no fixed name in the story and thus no fixed identity -- he defines himself by others' terms in his willingness to act as others tell him and to defer to the "experts" (i.e. scientists -- he is a consumer of science, of which his expensive telescope is a symbol). And like Binx, Will is essentially "Jewish" in his "homelessness" and his "wandering" (6, 62, 144); but Binx was always ironically aware of his situation, whereas Will is sometimes "hardly aware of his own name." In the third-person narration of his story, Will is even more silent than Binx; but like Binx's, Will's silence signifies -- it is not a part of the cliché of "a breakdown in communications such as one hears about nowadays," but a reflection of the fact that there is simply "not much to say" in an age where words fail to signify or establish any meaningful relationship between speaker and hearer (17). By creating a story about a hero who is "given to long silences" (5), Percy establishes a relationship with his readers which impells us "not only to participate in the construction of its meaning but to do some thinking of our own about language" (Vauthier, 1979, 95).

The only way Will can recover himself, name himself and his sickness, is through ordeal. As in *The Moviegoer*, it is the memory of an ordeal which begins Will's search for himself. We catch a glimpse of this memory at the beginning of the novel when Will's predicament is described and we are told of his father, who was "killed by his own irony and sadness" (6). Will's "wandering" (6), which is mentioned in the same context as his father, in a sense begins with the death of his father and involves a search for a father-figure.[18] Early on in the novel when he abandons his sessions with a psychiatrist, who is "a father of sorts," Will finds himself "alone in the world, cut adrift" (30). This is where the narrative of the beginning of the novel starts again, subtly revealing the relationship between the father-son relationship and new beginnings (32). Thereafter, every time the narrator alludes to Will's father or begins the story of a "man and boy," he is in a sense beginning Will's search again. (see 77 - 78; 121; 164; 186 - 87; 260 - 61).

It is actually another ordeal, the ordeal of Will's amnesia (a kind of nameless non-existence), that prevents Will from remembering the death of his father. When Will is almost at the point of remembering completely, shortly before he returns to the scene of his father's suicide, something else reminds Will of his father and "a thrill of recognition and of a nameless sweet horribleness" runs through him (205). Like Binx, Will is plagued with dreams of his former ordeal. One night he awakes, listening:

> Something had happened. There was not a sound, but the silence was not any ordinary silence. It was the silence of a time afterwards. It had been violated earlier ... A shot had been fired ... The silence reverberated with insult. There was something abroad (187).

Will's memory does not quite enable him to grasp or name the ordeal yet.[19] Toward the end of the novel, however, when Will comes back to the house where he grew up, the story of "the man and the boy" talking outside their house is repeated without ellipses: Will tells his father to "wait," not to go inside the house, fearing something terrible will happen; and after promising his son that he won't leave him, Will's father goes inside the house and kills himself. In an inversion of the scene in

The Moviegoer where the discussion of Binx's father's life and death is framed in silence, here the tragic narration of the suicide of Will's father is framed in cliché: as Will begins to remember, he hears his aunts inside the house listening to "the colloquy" of a gameshow; and as he remembers the gun going off, a commercial blares "-- and Anacin does not upset your stummick" (259, 261). After remembering the gunshot, Will continues to repeat "*Wait*," but then realizes "there is nothing to say now" (261, 262).

Will's silence and speech are an ironic reflection of the "fix" he is in (262). On the one hand, he is aware of the tendency of language to become corrupt, so that words like love become "opaque and curious" and love itself becomes a kind of "potato love" (81, 202). On the other hand, Will is all too willing to participate in the conventionality of society, to hold Kitty's "charms in his arms," for example, or to court her properly like a "gentleman" before marrying her and settling down to raise a family (81, 136). This irony, and not any intimacy on the part of Will and Kitty, explains the silences in their conversation. It also explains Will's "strange inertia," for he is one of those people who "do not know what to do and so live out their lives as if they were waiting for some sign or other," and who in the meantime are willing to do what others tell them or to speak only when it is expected of them (3, 10, 146). Both Will and Kitty are willing to be controlled in this way by Rita, who uses words to control and to silence others (see 142, 218 - 219) and who reverses Wittgenstein's famous dictum, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," by boldly claiming, "I know whereof I speak" (143).

Yet Will is ironically aware of Rita's intentions; he knows her to be a liar (219). In one interesting passage, Rita advocates what Kierkegaard would call "heroic silence," the silence which is justified by the claim that one is silent for "the good of others" (see Taylor, 1981; 175 - 77). She insinuatingly says to Will (whom she designates "Lance Corporal"):

> ... you are onto all of us, onto our most private selves. Or perhaps it is rather you and I who know; and perhaps it is in the nature of our secret that we cannot tell our friends or even each other but must rather act for the good of our friends.

To this last cliché Will is humorously mute:

> The engineer was silent. From force of habit, he looked as if he knew what she was talking about, what their 'secret' was, though in truth he had not the least idea (124).

Despite what these last comments may seem to insinuate, in a way Will *is* "onto" others -- his is a kind of knowing silence. In another conversation with Rita, he pays no attention to what she is saying and responds to her only mechanically: "He knew the frequency of her channel, so he didn't have to listen ... It was her silences, when they came, that he attended" (73, 74). Will is aware of the self-serving, clichéd way in which Rita speaks, and therefore pays no attention to it. Nevertheless, he is bound to hear her "when she gave him ordinary directions" (75).

Will's silences are a "sign" that he indeed cannot act for himself because he does not possess certain knowledge: "he had to know everything before he could do anything" (1). He is described as a "see-er," a "diviner," a "watcher" and a "listener," but the amount of knowledge which he gains by these means is betrayed by his silence. Will is also ironically described as an English detective because he is fond of eavesdropping on others. In more than one scene Will "silently" and secretly listens to Rita's and Kitty's conversation (47, 133). He desires an "omniscient," "angelic knowledge," "to know without being known" (133). This desire is analogous to his desire for transcendence through science, and is the opposite of his desire for carnal knowledge, to know women in "the coarsest possible way" (something he is reticent about with his psychiatrist and confesses only once, to Sutter Vaught [303]). This opposition between carnal and angelic corresponds to Kate's "dialectic" in *The Moviegoer*, and is later identified as immanence-transcendence by Sutter (271 - 72).

It is obvious when he finally meets Sutter that Will has learned very little in either the immanent or the transcendent mode (unlike Binx, Will spends little time in the former mode -- he never actively pursues "carnal" relations with women, and his fugue states only exacerbate a kind of transcendence from self). Sutter's actual arrival into the narrative is prepared for in an interesting way. We hear about "the great diagnostician" many times before we actually "see" him, and Will says at one point that he doesn't like "the sound" of Sutter (142, 146; cf. 50, 63, 64). When Sutter finally arrives on the scene we are told that he has "six overtones" in his "wry, ironic" voice (168, 212). What Sutter says, then, takes on an ambigous significance; but he is content to remain silent and ask Will questions when solicited for help. Will himself falls silent when Sutter asks him about his illness, about God, and about his father (172 - 73); and when asked whether he does not know about these things or whether he just won't tell Sutter about them, Will simply responds "I don't know" (174).

Whether Sutter indeed knows something Will does not or cannot know is left for the reader to decide. Sutter himself repudiates Will's faith in him by echoing Socrates' disclaimer, "I want no disciples" (176). He explains his silence toward Will in terms of the latter's "transcendence of abstraction," his inability to receive "news" as anything but "one more item of psychology," something to make one feel better rather than something to be acted upon (278). Yet Sutter's actions during Jamie's last bout of illness shows that he, like Will, is at a loss to know what to do. After Will catches up with Sutter in New Mexico, he "waits," "hoping the other would tell him something" about why he took Jamie to the desert; but Sutter remains "silent" (284). Later, Sutter attempts to explain his actions: "'I didn't want [Jamie] to be -- sunk. I thought he might do better, though I was afraid of this all along' -- [he] trailed off" (289). Although Sutter could very well have brought Jamie to the desert to give him a quick and painless death, as he attempted once before, his words still do not explain his actions.

Will's reticence and lack of action, then, is no more worse, and may be infinitely better, than Sutter's unexplainable action; and Will, we must remember, is not always at a loss for words. Sutter may be the one who "frees" Will "to act" and sets him "on the road" again (214); but it is Will who speaks for Jamie whenever the latter is silenced by his family (184), and for David, the silent and forlorn black servant (247): "Do like me," he tells David. "Watch and wait. Keep your eyes open" (172). This is the only time Will ever tells someone else to do something, and in the context of the passage it is probably not ironic. Although, besides pursuing Kitty, travelling and taking care of Jamie, Will takes very little decisive action, his watching and waiting is essentially in the stance of the see-er/diviner who anticipates "signs" of the "end." Like a prophet, Will suffers under the weight of "an unspeakable emotion" at times, while at other times he can "see things afresh" (7). And like a prophet, Will lives in the realm of total possibility: "*Something is going to happen*, he suddenly perceived that he knew all along. He shivered. It is for me to wait. Waiting is the thing. Wait and watch" (189). Again, these last two terms are almost certainly not ironic because they are often used in serious contexts by Percy. In one of Percy's longest passages on silence, near the end of the novel, he describes Will's realm of total possibility in his reaction to the landscape of the New Mexico desert:

> He sat down under a cistern and sniffed a handful of soil. The silence was disjunct. It ran concurrently with one and did not flow from the past. Each passing second was packaged in cottony silence. It had no antecedents ... Here one was not watched. There was no one. The silence hushed everything up, the small trees were separated by a geometry of silence. The sky was empty map space. Yonder Albuquerque forty miles away a mountain reared up like your hand in front of your face.
>
> This is the locus of pure possibility, he thought, his neck prickling. What a man can be the next minute bears no relation to what he is or what he was the minute before (280).

In this beautifully crafted passage there is a great deal more happening than an existentialist fictional rendering of the maxim "existence precedes essence." Here Will breaks away from the silence of the past, violated as it was by his father's shotgun blast (187), into the silence of the present. This silence is soothing ("cottony") because it recovers the individual "thing in itself" (each small tree is "separated by a geometry of silence"); yet it is also terrifying because it reveals the uncertainty and responsibility of pure possibility (symbolized by the sky as "empty map space") and the vastness of nature in relation to the individual (it is so vast that it is blinding, like "your hand in front of your face.") In the silence of the present there is no other, no look or stare,[20] only oneself, and the pure possibility to be what one freely wishes to be at any given moment.

Yet, as we see elsewhere in the novel, in Will's pure possibility lies "the vacuum and abyss of oneself" (123, 167), what Percy (after Sartre) also called "unspeakable nothingness." Because of one's inescapable self-ishness one becomes alienated from nature -- its threatening otherness must be assimilated by the vacuum of self. This is accomplished through continued symbolization of things in nature, until the thing itself (the mountain, the sky) disappears into the hardened symbol (see *MB*, 47 ff.). One's paradoxical and incurable other-directedness -- a result of the fact that one is nothing and needs to be filled with something -- may also lead to inauthentic symbolic transformations of others or oneself. Again, as in the case of landscape, self and other are reduced to objects through role-playing or impersonation or cliché. One attempts to become like a movie actor, who exists in the realm of pure possibility "and walks the tightrope over the abyss," but always retains his perfection by doing the "right" thing, or by remaining silent in order not to do the "wrong" thing (*MB*, 94). This is true of both Binx and Will when, like their idealistic fathers, they want to do the "right" thing. The only way to recover one's self and others after such symbolic transformations is through an ordeal -- through exposure to the imminent possibility of disaster, catastrophe, or death.

The silence of the present thus moves inevitably towards the silence of the future: "If a man lives in the sphere of the possible and waits for something to happen, what he is waiting for is war -- or the end of the world" (7). After the scene in the New Mexico desert quoted earlier, Will notices that "the silence changed. It became a presiding and penultimate silence like the heavy orchestral tacet before a final chord" (280). This silence anticipates the ordeal to come at the end of the novel, where Will, Sutter, and Jamie experience death impinging upon the pure possibility of self. At the beginning of the third to last chapter, "the sky was bright and pure and empty as map space"; but by the end of the chapter, as Jamie's death looms imminent, "the empty sky, instead of turning rosy with sunset, was simply going out like a light" (296, 304). The "stoic silence" of Will and Jamie's "unspoken agreement," which excludes both Sutter and Val, medicine and priestcraft from its fellowship, is about to be replaced by the silence of death (288, 291, 310).

Faced by the incomprehensibility of Jamie's imminent death, Will turns to Sutter for answers. Sutter claims, however, to be an unbeliever; he does not even "believe" in Wittgenstein's dictum, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must keep silent," although he invokes it against Will's continued questioning (296 - 97). But then Sutter immediately makes an odd reversal, saying that he does "agree with" Val about "what has happened to the world, about what God should be and what man is, and even what the Church should be" (297; the key word here is *should*). Sutter goes on paraphrasing Val about the exhaustion of religion in the modern age, much the same way he does in his casebook: "She believes that then, if we go the route and run out of Christendom, that the air would be cleared and even God might give us a sign, [and we might be able] to start all over again" (297). Then Sutter himself confesses: "when I first came to the desert I was waiting for a sign, but there was no sign and I am not waiting for one now" (298). Strangely, however, Will the "watcher" and "listener" does not seem to pay the slightest attention to Sutter's words. Will requires that Sutter actually tell him what to do, which Sutter, in a threefold kind of denial, refuses to do (300). Will then suddenly sees Sutter "for the first time as the dismalest failure, a man who had thrown himself away"; and he ironically asserts that "for the first time I feel certain of what I want to do" (300, 301). Will no longer "believes" Sutter (305); he chooses instead to live the cliché, to lead a "normal," "happy, useful life" by making "a contribution, however small," to his community (303 - 07). The last phrase, we remember, has already been satirized by Binx in *The Moviegoer*.

Will's "intuition" is smothered by cliché (306), and he regains it only at the deathbed of Jamie. Here, he acts as an "interpreter" between Jamie and the priest, intuiting Jamie's almost inaudible words. But Will's intuition is strangely blunted, almost mechanical; he seems to be the only one in the room who misses the religious significance of Jamie's last actions.[21] The priest, a rather ordinary man who pronounces the sacrament in a "flat mercantile voice," nevertheless "knew what he was doing" (317, 320).[22] Sutter makes a "sign" to the priest which assents to, if it does not condone, the sacrament (319). And Jamie's dying words recall those first words of Val's Tyree children, whose "breaking into the world of language" is likened to an act of belief (237). But Will misses the significance of Jamie's words, which are both an ending and a beginning.

The Last Gentleman ends, then, like *The Moviegoer*, with the ordeal of the death of a child, but this time the hero seemingly does not progress in his search.[23] In Percy's fiction, however, ordeal always leaves open the possibility of a new beginning. The narrator, in the context of Will's resolve to live a normal life, gives an oblique hint about how Will may indeed "spend the rest of his life" (307); and Sutter hints to Will that he will take his own life after Jamie's death. However, Will's repeated call to Sutter in the last chapter to "Wait" not only echoes Will's call to his father before his suicide, but also Will's and Sutter's own waiting for a "sign." Will's naming himself -- "I, Will Barrett" -- furthermore acknowledges that he needs Sutter as more than an "expert" who could tell Will what to do, that Will is perhaps willing to take responsibility to act on his own. And, significantly, Sutter does wait for Will.

NOTES - CHAPTER ONE

1. Saul Bellow's Dangling Man has also been seen as a "European influenced" work.

2. In The Fiction of Walker Percy, John Edward Hardy points out that Schexnaydre is "a Frenchified rendering of a German name and is well known in South Louisiana," noting also that the Baton Rouge telephone directory contains at latest count at least fifty listings of the name or variants thereof (277 - 78).

3. If the way people use language is an indication of their "deadness," it is also an indication that they have become less than human in their incapacity to symbolize. Thus, Binx's step-father is like an "eagle," his mother talks in a "mama-bee drone," Sam Yerger is like an elephant, Walter Wade is "sharklike" and "wolfish," etc.

4. No doubt Binx's father is also an element in the novel's other themes of time, memory and the past, which cannot be discussed due to the limited space in this chapter. Also, although Binx's father is important to his search, the father-figure will play an increasingly greater role in Percy's other novels. In The Last Gentleman, the protagonist's father is more central to his search than in The Moviegoer.

5. This is one example of Percy's use of silence to "frame" and highlight an important discussion. James Agee uses the same technique in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

6. Rotation is Kierkegaard's concept of "the quest for the new as the new, the reposing of all hope in what may lie around the bend" -- e.g. Huck Finn floating down the Mississippi on a raft, Hemingway's fisherman leaving the train and striking out on his own. Repetition is turning one's back "upon the new and the remote" and "voyaging into one's own past in search of oneself. It is thus in the nature of a conversion" and is found in two forms, "the aesthetic and the existential." (MB, 86, 95).

7. See Kierkegaard's essay "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle," and Percy's interview with Bradley Dewey, Conversations, 101 - 128. Percy places both the scientist and the artist in this category, though it is not certain whether Kierkegaard would designate the latter as a "genius." The term as far as I know is used twice in The Moviegoer, once in reference to Binx and another time to Etienne Sué, Sam Yerger's psychiatrist aquaintance (43, 150).

8. Percy's idea of the stare is different than Sartre's. For Percy, a stare could indicate both hatred or love, aggression or communion (see MB, 285 - 86).

9. Binx himself says of his search: "If God himself had appeared to me, it would have changed nothing ... if the proofs [of God] were proved and God presented himself, nothing would be changed" (128).

10. This passage has puzzled some critics. I think it is important to note that Binx is not comfortable with Kate's dependence (he calls it "disquieting" at one point [90]). Also, Percy in his interviews says that Binx and Kate are both dependent on one another at the end of the novel (Conversations, 305), and that he himself identifies with Kate more than any of his other characters (281).

11. See Martin Luschei (64 - 110) for an analysis of Binx's transition from the aesthetic to the religious sphere. Percy elsewhere states that this transition skips the ethical stage to move right into the religious. He also states that Kate stays in the aesthetic stage (see Conversations, 6, 66).

12. See Percy's essay "Stoicism in the South," in Signposts, 83 - 88.

13. John F. Desmond has said that Binx's "selfishness is in fact a kind of service to others" (288). I prefer to see this passage in relation to another similar one previously quoted, in which Binx says his selfish reasons are that, if he did not talk to others, he should be "cut loose metaphysically speaking" (64); thus, self can only find itself in others.

14. Lewis A. Lawson identifies this "asskicking" as Percy's "Indirect Communications." His seminal article goes far in revealing Percy's methods; however, I think that Percy's communications are more generally characterized by silence rather than indirectness.

15. Michael Pearson notes the importance of dialogue at the end of Percy's novels. As well, Preston Browning states that at the end of The Moviegoer Binx and Kate become "co-creators" of sorts, creating a kind of script that parodies the roles Kate was previously forced into playing by society, such as the beautiful, helpless Southern belle (286 - 87).

16. We need pay attention to only some of the silences of The Last Gentleman in order to see a building upon and an elaboration of Percy's first novel. As space is limited, I will concentrate on the most important occurrences of silence in his second novel, leaving out, for example, the muteness of the female patient who underwent shock treatment (43; this character will show up again in the form of Allie in The Second Coming, the "sequel" to The Last Gentleman).

17. Simone Vauthier has analyzed this irony in terms of the third-person narration of The Last Gentleman, and in relation to the narrator-character-reader relationship. The "spaces" and "voids" between Will's names and his real life situation, she says, make Will "an ambiguous signifier to be decoded diversely as the story unfolds" (81).

18. A connection between Will's search for his father and for a heavenly Father is highly possible. In his discussion of Walker Percy's fictional fathers, William Rodney Allen implies the connection but does not pursue it further.

19. George Steiner, in an analysis of Dante's Paradise, points out the connection between the failure of language and the failure of memory (41).

20. In House Made of Dawn, N. Scott Momaday also uses silence to describe the same New Mexico landscape, but includes in his narrative a strange albino who stares at his victims out of the darkness of natural cover (66 - 67). Like Melville's Moby-Dick, Momaday's albino is the very personification of evil and of malevolence in nature. There is, however, no corresponding construct in Percy's use of silence. And instead of being a sign of "the benign indifference of the universe," one could argue that Percy's "empty" sky in the passage quoted is a symbol of one's paradoxical possibility and nothingness in oneself.

21. Walker Percy stated that The Last Gentleman "ends, unlike The Moviegoer, with Barrett missing it, like Kate missed it" (Conversations, 67).

22. Walker Percy acknowledged Father Boomer's "mediocrity" but stated that, nevertheless, the priest possesses Kierkegaardian "authority" (Conversations, 114).

23. As usual, Percy's ending has drawn the most critical comment. Simone Vauthier seems to imply that Will comes to accept himself "through the free use of his name" (80). Martin Luschei suggests that Will is "an evangelist" without "good news" (167). And Susan Kissel boldly states that Sutter experiences a "conversation to life" (129). Malcolm Magaw is perhaps the most correct when he says that the ambiguity of the ending is "appropriate" at this stage of Will's life (78). Walker Percy himself was typically ambiguous about his ending in various interviews (see Conversations, 42, 126, 221).

CHAPTER TWO
Ranting and Raving:
Love in the Ruins and *Lancelot*

An individual cannot assist or save a time, he can only express that it is lost.
Soren Kierkegaard, The Present Age

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips ...
Isaiah 6:5 (RSV)

In his essay "A Novel About the End of the World," Walker Percy states that the modern novelist performs a "quasi-prophetic" function: "Like the prophet, his news is generally bad ... It is fitting that he should shock and therefore warn his readers by speaking of last things" (*MB*, 104). And like the prophet of old who stood outside the religious establishment to condemn it, the "new novelist" diverges from the "new theologian":

> The curious fact is that it is the new novelist who judges the world and not the new theologian. It is the novelist who, despite his well-advertised penchant for violence, his fetish for freedom, his sexual adventurism, pronounces anathemas upon the most permissive of societies, which in fact permits him everything (110).

The novelist's problem, however, is that he has inherited a defunct vocabulary: "Unlike the prophet, whose mouth has been purified by a burning coal, the novelist's art is often bad." So he does the only thing he can do: "Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, he calls on every ounce of cunning, craft, and guile he can muster from the darker regions of his soul. The fictional use of violence, shock, comedy, insult, the bizarre, are the everyday tools of his trade" (104, 118).

Love in the Ruins and *Lancelot* offer the most transparent examples of these tools in Percy's work, and could be seen to comprise a new phase in his fiction.[1] In *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* Percy shows a good deal of cunning and guile, always approaching his reader from the rear, so to speak; and he directs a sometimes brilliant mixture of comedy and insult at his audience inasmuch as we see ourselves in his characters. But in his first two novels Percy stops short of violence and the bizarre.[2] His next two novels, however, are a departure from "his previous languid pace and elegant indirection" (Bradley Dewey, *Conversations*, 103). Percy himself notes a divergence from his earlier fiction in an interview in which he related that he knew it was time to change his fiction when Susan Sontag commented to him: "'You've written two novels, both of which end with a philosopher bending over a dying youth'" (*Conversations*, 68). In *Love in the Ruins*, this change takes the form of an exploration and exploitation of the popular genre of the futuristic novel, which "fittingly leads to *Lancelot*, a new confabulation of disparate literary genres" (Max Webb, quoted in Crowley, 23).

Yet the methods Percy adopts in *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot* are indicative of more than just change for the sake of change; they seem to reflect a growing frustration on Percy's part with his oblique and indirect style of writing, a desire to communicate with his readers in a more direct fashion. Ironically, it is in these novels that Percy most resembles the artist criticized by Susan Sontag for "aggression against his audience" (190), and for a "mad," "frenetic and overgeneralizing" apocalyptic vision (203). Percy's aggression and apocalypse, however are usually not conveyed in his silence, as Sontag says of the modern artist (184 - 85, 203), but rather in his words, in the sometimes unrelenting satire and diatribes of this phase of his writing. The degree to which these novels are silent thus may be a measure of their success or failure to communicate something which their author considers vital to existence; for Percy's silences always indicate not only the devaluation of language and the imminence of an end, but the possibility of a new beginning and a fresh way of speaking. Accordingly, *Love in the Ruins* is less successful in conveying a sense of imminence and renewal to the reader, mainly because Percy uses silence in a less effective and complex way than in other novels, in order to favor more conventional modes of plot development (such as suspense and action); but *Lancelot* acts as a paradoxical corrective to Percy's previous novel by establishing a complex relationship between author, characters, and reader, and by provoking the latter into reacting to the narrator's diatribe and filling in the background silence of the text.

In a speech given to promote *Love in the Ruins* (a fairly rare occurrence -- Percy was not comfortable with promoting his novels) Walker Percy warns his readers that his novel is a satire, and as such is given to exaggeration in order to make evils in society more noticeable. He also says that the novel is a prophecy of sorts -- a prophecy meant to be wrong, not only because it is mixed with satire and exaggeration, but also because the prophesier is hopeful that the disaster he is foretelling will turn into a renewal of society (*Signposts*, 248). As in his earlier novels, Percy develops the idea of ordeal as an end and a beginning, and uses silence as an anticipation and elaboration of new language. The silences in *Love in the Ruins*, however, are so overpowered by the pitch of Percy's satire as to compromise the hope in his prophecy.

Love in the Ruins begins with a flow of words, one long sentence aimed at the "death-dealing western world" and at setting an apocalyptic tone. The next paragraphs employ much the same enigmatic tone as the two previous novels: the first-person narrator, who is sitting against a pinetree somewhere "waiting for the end of the world," says that "two more hours should tell the story" (31). He does not tell us exactly what is about to happen, but instead resumes the denouncement of his first sentence. Unlike Binx and Will, this narrator "has no philosophical problems" and "knows what he believes" (*Conversations*, 75). He is therefore not unwilling to speak on topics such as God or "the secret ills of the spirit" (3, 5), and in fact soon launches on a rather tedious diatribe which satirizes the Catholic church, American politics, liberals, conservatives, American literature and everything else he considers a symptom of the "Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted" Western world.

At this point, the reader may likely dismiss the narrator as a madman (and as a spokesman for the too transparent views of the author) and may simply stop reading, if the narrator had not already shown an ironic self-awareness: "Either I am right and a catastrophe will occur," he says at the beginning of the novel, "or it won't and I'm crazy" (3). Like the third-person narrative of *The Last Gentleman*, this first-person narrative shifts between a detached, ironic view and a sympathetic view of the protagonist, although with first-person narration the reader is more likely to interpret the narrator's opinions as those of the author. Indeed, by creating a narrator who is in many ways as reticent as Binx Bolling or Will Barrett, and by placing in this narrator's mouth the diatribe and satire of much of the novel, Percy exposes his own opinions in a way he was so careful to avoid in his previous writing.

The silences of the protagonist in *Love in the Ruins* are thus vitiated by a relatively uneconomical and direct style, but they still call attention to themselves as the key to the meaning of the text. The hero of the novel -- we can now call him Tom More, although he does not explicitly name himself -- identifies himself as a lapsed Catholic and a wanderer, "like the Jews in the wilderness," who is given to "great heart-wrenching longings that have no name" (19, 20). Tom is humorously forthcoming about his beliefs and values: "I believe in God and the whole business but love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all" (6). His narrative begins, like Binx's, with an ordeal that is somehow both "horrible" and "pleasant" (4); and like Will, Tom remembers another ordeal intermittently throughout his story: the death of his daughter and the abandonment by and subsequent death of his wife. Tom's "little invention," which can somehow diagnose the maladies that "poison the wellsprings of man's hope," is cause for other ellipses. When explaining how his invention came into being, Tom quotes but does not explain several newspaper captions, and then says of the expectations of fame to which his invention gave rise:

> Alas, the promise didn't pan out. On the contrary. There followed twenty years of silence and decline. My daughter, Samantha, died; my wife ran off with a heathen Englishman ... (21).

Tom's relative silence about certain things contrasts with the language of the society in which he lives, which tends to establish private codes and secret meanings that exclude the uninitiated. At the home of one of his patients, Charley Parker, Tom listens to Charley and his wife as they engage in "mysterious six-layered conversations with all manner of secret signs." Tom even finds their voices difficult to hear (37, 34). Also, Tom's mother uses "her gift for seeing signs and divining hidden meanings" for no other purpose than to get rich in the real estate business (150 - 51). And in the case of the love community in the marsh, who speak in their own lingo about the environment and the "freedom of the individual," silence is used again as a textual marker to alert the reader to abuses of language. Thus, when Tom visits them and an accident occurs with his invention, they are in danger of being killed by a "silent implosion" (44).

In his house in Paradise Estates (another obvious use of satire by Percy), Tom lives in a kind of cocoon of silence -- even his appliances are silent (54). He seems insulated from the violence of the inhabitants of the marsh nearby, until a sniper's bullets shatter the silence of his safe abode. Subsequently, Tom suspects that the sniper is following him and lives with the ordeal of being shot at any moment. Strangely, he "does not wish to speak of the sniper" with others (65) and so possibly put an end to the ordeal; he rather prefers himself (and his readers) to experience the silent suspense of the ordeal. This suspense reaches a climax when, in the dark woods in the middle of a thunderstorm, Tom thinks he hears the voices of his assailant and two other accomplices. Although it is difficult to hear because "thunder rolls, covering their voices," Tom thinks that they are plotting a violent uprising of some sort (89). When Tom finally attempts to communicate his "sense of impending disaster" to two of his colleagues, "silence falls" because they don't believe him (96, 97).

Throughout the episodes of the sniper and the conspiracy, then, Percy uses silence not only to oppose abuses of language, but to carry the bulk of his satire by means of the narrative device of suspense. This is not to imply that Percy fails in sustaining the action of the plot. *Love in the Ruins* contains some of Percy's most action-packed scenes (see Section Four, chapters 3 - 9). However, scenes such as a burning house "roaring and crackling busily in the silence" during the uprising, or the "roaring silence" preceding Tom's capture by the bantus (210, 249), seem primarily intended simply to carry the reader from one scene to another, rather than to comment on the devaluation of language or the possibility of a new kind of discourse. This is a departure in Percy's fiction; for while his silences always create the desire on the part of the reader to fill in the "gaps" of the narration, nowhere is this desire so artificially produced than with the suspenseful silence of *Love in the Ruins*.

However, silences in this novel are sometimes a great deal more complex than in the passages just quoted; and this is true especially of the silences connected with the question of

Tom's illness and possible madness. From the beginning of Tom's narrative the reader is alerted to his psychological instability. In the opening of the novel he himself mentions the possibility that he may be crazy. He then speaks of "signs and portents," of "principalities and powers" in the skies, and of "evil particles" inducing one to "rage," "terror" and "roaming" (4, 5); and he shows a certain amount of paranoia and delusions of grandeur when he asserts that these things are known only to him and that he can "save America" with his invention (5, 49).

Like Will Barrett's difficulty with immanence-transcendence, Tom's problem has to do with "angelism-bestialism," the problem of physical desire versus scientific abstraction. Although Tom does not stop ranting and raving about his scientific invention, his sexual desire deprives him of the ability to speak coherently: "Love, I, you" he proclaims to Moira at the hotel (116). Tom's silence is a physical as well as a psychological manifestation. When making love to Lola in a sand trap, for example, he experiences an allergic reaction and his throat literally "squeaks shut" (82; cf. 309). His psychological affliction, which he calls "satyriasis" (17), literally reduces him to the level of an animal, deprived of speech but not the instinct to copulate.

Like Will, however, Tom's illness qualifies him to listen and communicate differently than others, and raises the question of what the definition of "sane" is in a society where language is corrupt. "Why is it," Tom asks at one point, "I feel better, see more clearly, can help more people when I am crazy? Not being crazy, being sane in a sane world, is the craziest business of all" (175). After his suicide attempt, Tom checks himself into a mental ward, where he comments on the irony of what the world calls sane and insane: "Sane outside [the hospital], I can't make head or tail of people. Mad inside ... I listen and watch. Outside there is not time to listen" (90). Away from the interminable and meaningless discourse of society, Tom finds his communication with "mad" people somehow better than with sane people. In the same account of his stay as a patient in the hospital, Tom humorously adds: "I felt so bad I groaned aloud an Old Testament lamentation AAAIEOOOOW! to which responded a great silent black man sitting next to me on the blocky couch: 'Ain't it the truth though'" (90). But when Tom leaves the hospital, he notes in despair, "Things are too naked here. People look and talk and smile and are nice and the abyss[3] yawns. The niceness is terrifying" (91).

Tom retains the status of a patient throughout most of the novel, never formally being discharged from the hospital; and as a patient, the terror of others' looks, speech and "niceness" contributes to Tom's inability to speak. "Buddy" Brown is the personification of the "niceness" of society; at the same time, he speaks a kind of dual language, a language of ideals from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and of maxims from the bahaviorist tradition (Luschei, 211). Shortly before the debate in the Pit, Tom meets Buddy in the hallway and listens to him speak about "man's sacred right to choose his own destiny and realize his own potential" -- to which Tom only answers with silence and with brief, Hemingway-like responses (167). Later, Tom loses his ability to speak coherently, responding to Buddy with "No fanks," "I'm Fime," "Eins upon a oncy," and "Rike." As Tom teeters on the brink of what he calls the "abyss," he says to the reader, "I do not speak well. I've lost. I'm a patient" (176). Tom is thus reduced to the status of patient by his scientist colleagues, and at this moment seems helpless to defend Mr. Ives, a fellow victim of the scientific community, in the impending debate with Buddy in the Pit.

Ironically, Tom is prepared to beat Buddy Brown through the agency of Percy's satiric Mephistophelian character, Art Immelmann. As in Percy's other suspenseful scenes, he prepares the reader for Art Immelmann's entrance into the plot through storm and silence (138). And when Art first enters Tom's office, Tom is listening to Mozart's Don Giovanni descending into hell, as lighting strikes and the lights go out (140). Here it seems Percy is almost satirizing his satire, stepping back from his fiction and allowing the reader to do so also in order to appreciate his humor. This is where Percy's satire is best, when it does not take itself too seriously. At the same time, such satire allows the serious aspects of the passage to impact the reader. Art is, after all, a personification of evil masked by banality. His essential duplicity is suggested by his "heavy complex odor, the intricate canceled smell of sweat neutralized by a strong deodorant" (141).

Percy's devil, however, also has the ability to restore speech. Shortly before the scene in the Pit -- after Tom speaks incoherently, sees the abyss yawning, and admits to himself "I've lost" --

he goes into the washroom and sees the vortex of himself in the mirror: "I am gazing at my face in the mirror," he records. "The image reverses on the retina and a hole opens" (177). Tom here is Kierkegaard's "sensuous-erotic genius," one who, like Don Juan, engages in endless erotic adventures, and essentially lacks the ability to express himself or communicate in any meaningful way because of his relationship to the sensual and immediate (see Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*; and Taylor, 1981, 168 - 69). Tom has lost the ability of self-reflection, a precondition of speech; for "language involves reflection, and cannot, therefore, express the immediate" (Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*; quoted in Taylor, 169). Tom has therefore lost the ability to abstract himself from himself, to act as a scientist: "I am a patient," he admits. Art Immelmann, however, restores the angelism-bestialism dialectic in Tom by using Tom's own invention to stimulate areas of his brain. First, Art restores Tom's ability to abstract, so that, like Sartre's Roquentin in *Nausea*, he sees his hand as that of a stranger: "What a beautiful strong hand!" Tom exclaims. "But the hand of a stranger. I have never seen it before" (179). Then Art stimulates the "musical-erotic" area of Tom's brain to make him a true "scientist-lover" (180). Tom thus allows himself to be turned into a reflective kind of Don Juan, with his "heart beating in time to Mozart," and with a renewed readiness to engage in abstract debate. He exists in the sphere of Kierkegaard's "aesthetic damnation," and goes down into "the Pit" to meet his fate.

In the climactic scene of the debate in the Pit, Tom scandalizes the "qualitarians" (euthanasists) both with his speech and with his silence. The qualitarians prefer to maintain a kind of reticence of propriety on the topic of euthanasia in the presence of Mr. Ives, who is a candidate for euthanasia and the subject of the debate. When Tom speaks plainly of the way Mr. Ives may be put to death, the students in the audience blush, "girls try to pull their dresses down over their knees," and the Director of Medicine threatens to revoke Tom's patient-staff status. But after Buddy lets Tom use his invention on him, a prolonged silence ensues (191-92). This is part of the public trial/ordeal of Tom and his "lapsometer," and may very well determine the fate of the mute Mr. Ives. Tom refuses to fill in the silence with explanations or excuses; and just before the silence gets unbearable, Buddy's inhibitions disappear and the lapsometer is shown to work.

Tom's invention may work, but as the symbol of science's ability to understand and treat the real ailment of any one individual, it is a dismal failure. This is evident after Tom treats Mr. Ives with the lapsometer and the latter regains his speech. There follows a long explanation of his muteness, during which we are told that Mr. Ives was a linguist who cracked the code of a hieroglyph in order to understand a dead language, but who developed "behavior problems" and was subsequently subjected to a behavior modification program. In reaction to the scientists who attempted to control his responses by "throwing him in a Skinner box," Mr. Ives said he did the only thing left in his power to do: he refused to respond at all -- he became silent (194 - 98). Thus, behaviorism, as a form of science, is useless to solve the problems of the individual, inasmuch as they are not physical. Mr. Ives's problem involved language, bringing a dead language to life. And he succeeded; whereas Tom's lapsometer, even though it could "cure" Mr. Ives muteness, could not diagnose his problem (136). At the end of the Pit scene, however, should the reader have missed the import of Mr. Ives's silence, Percy has Art Immelmann distribute lapsometers to the audience, and all hell breaks loose.

Besides his trial in the Pit, Percy has Tom go through several more ordeals. His capture by the black guerrillas is perhaps meant as a satiric ordeal, but it is difficult to tell in this novel. Tom More's escape from the guerrillas -- which Percy describes in terms of being "born again" (125) -- employs such "blatant" symbolism and "painfully obvious" allegory (Kennedy, 125), that one is left wondering if Percy was not satirizing the concept of being "born again" as an outworn cliché. Yet it is the speech and aims of the guerrillas ("to build a new society") that Percy seems to target shortly before Tom's escape. During an interrogation by the guerrillas, Tom keeps silent rather than tell the truth about what he thinks of their uprising (255 - 56). Tom's "born again" experience is thus partly an escape from his captors' abuse of language; but if read "straight," without satire, his escape is simply from the cliché of the black militants to the cliché of the born again experience.

Two ordeals which are treated without any possible irony or satire are the deaths of Tom's daughter and wife. His desire to be with Samantha and Doris again are a part of his "nameless longings" (20, 82); and on two occasions, when with Moira pursuing his erotic longings, Tom quietly weeps at the memory of Samantha (117, 222). These memories are for Tom "the thread in the labyrinth" that may lead him into a truly existential repetition (*MB*, 95 - 96). Remembering his trips with Doris, Tom recounts how he left her early in the mornings to go to mass, following the "thread in the labyrinth" of the interstate highways (216) to a church. Tom then describes the strange sacrament of communion which saved him from abstraction:

> it took religion to save me from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the angels ... it took nothing less than touching the thread off the misty interstates and eating Christ himself to make me a mortal man again and let me inhabit my own flesh and love [Doris] in the morning (217).

This passage is similar to the passage in which Tom finally comes to terms with the ordeal of Samantha's death, near the end of the novel. Tom finally confesses that he denied Samantha medical treatment that miraculously could have saved her life: "Suppose," Tom explains, "you ask God for a miracle and God says yes, very well. How do you live the rest of your life?" (320). Like Kierkegaard's aesthetic hero who will not speak to save a loved one (whose silence slips from the "heroic" to the "demonic," *Fear and Trembling* [113 - 114]), Tom derives a kind of morbid pleasure from the pain of his ordeal:

> Samantha, forgive me. I am sorry you suffered and died, my heart broke, but there have been times when I was not above enjoying it.
> Is it possible to live without feasting on death? (320).

The word "feasting" thus ties the suffering of Samantha -- like that of Lonnie in *The Moviegoer* and Jamie in *The Last Gentleman* -- to communion and to the suffering of Christ.

This is the thread in the labyrinth which Tom follows again at the end of the novel. Confronted by the ever more sinister Art Immelmann a last time, and unable to act or speak in order to save himself or Ellen from Art's influence, Tom blurts out a prayer which at first he thinks is inaudible: "*Sir Thomas More, kinsman, saint, best dearest merriest of Englishmen, pray for us and drive this son of a bitch hence*" (322). The audible words work, however, and the elliptical structure of the main part of the novel -- which begins on July 4 with the ordeal of imminent catastrophe and ends on July 4 with the ordeal of confronting "the devil" -- finally ends with Ellen and Tom together. In the epilogue, Tom has undergone a repetition of sorts, marrying again and having another daughter, and going back to confession and mass. At confession, when asked by Father Smith (another of Percy's "silent" priests[4]) whether he is truly remorseful for his sins, Tom falls silent (338); it is only when Father Smith entreats him to be "a better doctor" and show "a bit of ordinary kindness to people, particularly our own families" -- it is only then that Tom is "ashamed" and puts on sackcloth and ashes (340 - 41). Tom still believes in his lapsometer, but with an important qualification: "if I can get it right." He still hopes that one day he will be able to help someone become a "sovereign wanderer, lordly exile, worker and waiter and watcher" (326); but he sees the limitations of science and contents himself with "a bed at home" (343).

Love in the Ruins thus ends with an affirmation of family and of life; but this ending is somehow unsatisfactory, perhaps because it fails to convey what Percy's previous novels convey: the possibility, or in this case the plausibility, of a new beginning after the end of the novel. Percy has so often satirized the desire for a new society in his novel (Paradise Estates, the bantus' "new society," the love community's "new life," etc., etc.) that his optimistic reaffirmation of family and community at the end of the novel seems strangely out of place. His silences are still a protest against cliché and inauthentic speech, and they still invite his readers to participate in the creation of the meaning of the novel; but to the extent that Percy's novel is "an adventure story with the expected physical threats, suspense, and beautiful women" (Leclair, 165), action has precedence over the intriguing opacity that we find in his other fiction. This concession to the dictates of the genre of Percy's third novel, combined with its often heavy-handed and indiscriminate satire, ensures that the silences of *Love in the Ruins* collapse under the weight of its words.

In his next novel, *Lancelot*, Walker Percy corrected many of the shortcomings of *Love in the Ruins*. Instead of alienating the reader through satire and irony, which are loud even in the silences of the text of his third novel, Percy instead created a text in which silence and speech are coexistent and coordinate. Behind the rantings and ravings of the narrator of *Lancelot* -- which are even more sustained, and sound even more frenetic and insane than those of Tom More in *Love in* *the Ruins* -- is the silence of a character whose message, as the narrator himself admits, is at least as important as that of the narrator/anti-hero. The result is not strictly a monologue, but rather a kind of dialogue[5] between these two characters; and the reader in turn, is drawn into responding to this dialogue not only through its gaps and silences, but through the narrator's often seductive stream of rhetoric.[6]

Lancelot opens, not with a stream of satiric rhetoric as did *Love in the Ruins*, but with a resumption of Percy's carefully enigmatic tone: "Come into my cell," says the narrator. "Make yourself at home"(1). The novel begins with an invitation -- in a sense, the reader is being asked to "enter" the text. As we read on we find that the narrator's remark is addressed directly to an auditor who knows almost as little as we do about the present circumstance of the narrator. We discover that the narrator is in a Center for Aberrant Behavior, that he can't seem to bring himself to remember his past, is fond of deciphering "signs," and has a name which seems to be significant. The reader is invited to fill in the "gaps" of the narration: Why is the narrator in the "nuthouse"? What is the significance of the sign he reads through his window, or his "little view," as he calls it? What is the significance of his name, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar?[7]

The reader is thus invited to become, like the narrator and the auditor, an interpreter of signs. This invitation is reinforced when, in typical Percyan fashion, the opening of the novel is repeated again at the beginning of Chapter Two: "Come in, come in," says Lance (5). At this point we also know little about Lance's silent auditor, other than that he is a "priest-psychiatrist" and shares a great deal of Lance's past. He is like a mirror image of Lance, so that when Lance describes their first meeting in the hallway he says it was "like seeing myself" (3). Like Lance, the priest-psychiatrist seems attracted to Lance's "little view" (1, 5). He stands at Lance's window for much of the narration. And like Lance, his names have a significance in relation to "the oblique and obscure circumstances" of both of their lives (5). In the past, he was alternately called "Harry Hotspur," "Prince Hal," "Northumberland," "Percival or Parsifal," "Pussy," and finally "John" (5 - 6). As we also later discover about Lance, the priest-psychiatrist (I will call him Percival) was fond of "acting" in different roles at different times (11, 54). He now acts in the capacity of a priest and is known as Father John, but this name may simply be another indication of his role rather than of the true nature of his character. Lance is not sure, for instance, whether "John" refers to the Evangelist or the Baptist (6); and then, significantly, Lance says to Percival: "I found out who you are.... A priest-physician" (7).

As in all of Percy's fiction, naming is part of the symbolization process of language and reveals not only the identity of an individual, but also the character of a society. Somehow the language of Lance and Percival's society has become corrupt, "worn out" (75). People have become like actors, less inclined to speak as they will, than as their "voice teachers" dictate (66). Living in a society in which words fail to signify, Lance and Percival both attempt to use language in a way that does signify. For example, unlike many characters in this novel and in other Percy novels, Lance and Percival do not use nicknames as a means to assimilate others into a private system of symbolization. It is significant that they call each other by their proper names: Lance does not call Percival by the many nicknames he had in the past, nor by the name Percival has most recently acquired, Father John, but rather he simply calls him Percival; and Lance makes a point of relating how Percival "liked to pronounce all of" Lance's names (4). Just as they are both fond of gazing out of Lance's window, they both share the same "view" of the importance of naming.[8] But Lance and Percival also share a despair which has "no name" (90, 149), and they seem to be different in the degree to which they recognize this despair in themselves. While Lance is driven to the brink of insanity by the recognition of the way society engenders despair in the individual, Percival's acceptance of the secular role of the psychiatrist seems to indicate that he is unaware of his despair to some extent -- that is, he is unaware of it until he listens to Lance's eloquently mad narrative, which confronts him with an either/or argument and forces him to choose who he will be: either a psychiatrist, or a priest.

Thus, the overgeneralizing, frenetic and mad discourse of Lance is not entirely negative,[9] just as it is not entirely without its silences. Lance's discourse is preceded by his recognition that language is worn out, and by his subsequent reluctance to speak to anyone before meeting Percival: "What do you say to someone," he asks, "when you have already said everything" (5).

Lance is in many ways like Percy's other protagonists: he is aware of the devaluation of language; he is a "watcher" and a wayfarer, likening himself to Robinson Crusoe and to a Jew (39, 126, 164); his name is an indication of his ability to act in several roles; he must come to terms with his past in order to discover who he is; he has a penchant for deciphering signs; and he is crazy and yet not crazy. Like Tom More in *Love in the Ruins*, Lance has gone through the ordeals of the faithlessness and loss of a wife (in Lance's case, the deaths of two wives), to which he continually and less and less obliquely refers throughout his narrative. His narrative, like those of each Percy novel thus far, is in effect a retelling, not once, but many times, with many beginnings as Lance continually refers back to the beginning of his "search" (11, 14, 20, 95). Thus, even though he is a murderer, Lance retains our sympathy as much as any other Percyan hero who seeks to know what he already knows, and to "name" the malady afflicting society (19, 28).

Unlike Percy's other protoganists, however, the anti-hero of *Lancelot* undertakes a kind of inverted religious search for evil.[10] In a world where God is absent or does not signify (117, 124 - 125), Lance's search becomes a search for sexual sin. His idea of apocalypse is, appropriately, the discovery of his wife's adultery, which actually begins rather than ends his life. Faced with the "unspeakableness" of his wife's action (12), Lance sees "the end of the world" in the letter of the alphabet signifying his daughter's blood type (17). Upon determining the significance of the letter, he feels "like Rip van Winkle waking up" (58). Like all of Percy's heroes during ordeal, Lance literally comes to himself: he does pushups, takes a bath carefully "for the first time in years," lays on the floor till the cold penetrates his thighs, and exclaims: "For years, I realized, I had lived in a state of comfort and abstraction ... and had not allowed myself to feel anything" (59). Then he asks himself: "Can a man stand alone, naked and at his ease ... without assistance, without diversion, without a woman, in silence? Yes. It was possible ... Nothing happened. I realized I had been afraid of silence" (59 - 60).

Lance comes to an appreciation of silence[11] through the self-obliterating effect of others' speech. Shortly after discovering Margot's adultery, he overhears his daughter, his wife, and the other actors discussing him. They speak in a kind of code, and their voices are literally difficult to hear at times (perhaps this is a function of Lance's repression of painful details in his narration). What Lance does hear, however, is the sound of his "not being there," of his "absence" (43, 44). He feels obliterated by the duplicitous conversation of others as he realizes that even his family is complicit in his cuckoldry. Afterward, he looks in the mirror and sees himself as a nothingness, a "hole" (57).

The significance of both Lance's and Percival's silences are explained in terms of the ability of language to obliterate the subject, as well as its tendency to become devalued and lose the power to signify. As Lance tells Percival at one point in his narration:

> Some years ago I discovered that I had nothing to say to anybody nor anybody to me, that is, anything worth listening to. There is nothing left to say. So I stopped talking. Until you showed up. I don't know why I want to talk to you or what I need to tell you or need to hear from you.... It's strange: I have to tell you in order to know what I already know. I talk, you don't. Perhaps you know even better than I that too much has been said already. Perhaps I talk to you because of your silence. Your silence is the only conversation I can listen to (74).

Here Lance does not seem to be the selfish, beastly narrator some critics make him out to be. He acknowledges that he needs another, that perhaps he needs what he can hear from Percival, and that Percival might "know even better" than Lance knows. This is not Lance's only acknowledgment of Percy's "knowledge." At the beginning of his narrative, speaking of their meeting in the hall, Lance says to Percival, "I knew you and saw that you knew me even better" (3). And later he says, "I don't really know why I did what I did. That's what I want with you" (81). He constantly asks Percival questions, not always rhetorically but at times expecting answers (e.g. 79); and at such times it seems Percival deliberately evades answering them by remaining silent, or by changing the topic (e.g. 87).

Percival's silence is thus not literal; nor is it always positive. Like the silence of Percy's other priests, Percival's silence is a reaction to the devaluation of religious language;[12] but it also seems to be a sign of religious doubt, or of his "not knowing" the answers to the problems posed by Lance (55, 94, 111, 140). Lance's accusations to that effect seem more than provocations on his part, for at various times Percival seems distracted or uninterested in Lance's narrative (16, 18, 37). Lance guesses from the outset of the novel that Percival may be in love, to which Percival responds with silence, and then with a quiet, not too convincing denial (140). Whatever the reason for Percival's distraction, it surely has something to do with his religious vocation. By identifying himself as both a psychiatrist and a priest, Percival has become trapped in the dialectic between immanence and transcendence -- although in Percival's case the dialectic would involve a conflict between the desire to serve a secular science, and the desire to transcend the immanence of the scientific world view. Percival no doubt sees his own situation in Lance's dialectical search, which involves a bestial view of sexuality (a quasi-religious devotion to immanence), and a paradoxical abstraction from all emotion or feeling (Lance responds with "curiosity" to the death of his first wife and the adultery of his second). Percival's identification with Lance is reinforced even more considering that their "kinship of spirit" resides in their tendency to engage equally in abstraction as in sexual promiscuity (3, 6).

Although Percival has supposedly embraced religion and shunned any carnal desires, he is not unaffected by Lance's description of this dialectic. We can trace Percival's silent reactions to Lance's search only through the latter's observations, which, despite their obvious bias, are on the whole reliable.[13] Percival is described as looking sardonic (3, 11), surprised (7, 16), unironic (80), unhappy (74), mournful and sorrowful (119). As has been mentioned, his silence is not literal. Rather, it is "textual" in that Lance does not directly record any of Percival's words except at the end of the novel. Percival apparently asks Lance several leading questions, first about Belle Isle (30), then primarily about love (80, 106, 110). These questions, as well as Percival's looks, are designed to prevent Lance from repressing important parts of his story, and thus play a vital part in the continuation of the narrative. But they are also a gauge of Percival's feelings about his own state of affairs. When Lance tells Percival of the horrible death of his first wife, and of the "curiosity" it engendered, Percival returns the next day looking "like the patient" (74).[14] Lance then says to him: "... you're supposed to have the good news, not me. Knowing you, I think I know what ails you. You believe all right, but you're thinking, Christ, what's the use?" (74) Percival has no doubt ruminated with horror on Lance's ability to abstract himself from any feeling, and has perhaps recognized with despair this same tendency in his own devotion to psychiatry. This devotion is strong enough to have prevented Percival from sharing "good news."

It is only after Lance launches upon his first extended tirade, what Lance himself calls the "ravings of a madman" (146), that Percival finally decides to stop "playing the priest" (87). Lance proposes an alternative to "Christian love" in his idea of a new society based on "chivalry" and "respect," and confronts Percival with a choice: "I give myself a certain license to talk crazy, so to speak. I might even be joking .... You must decide for yourself" (146). The next day, Percival has decided -- he comes to listen to Lance, wearing, for the first time, the uniform of a priest (148).

Lance's ranting and raving is positive in the sense that is may lead to self-knowledge, as is the case with Percival. Like Tom More, Lance himself is self-aware to some extent: he knows he sounds like a madman, and even gives himself "a certain license to talk crazy." Lance also knows that something is bothering him and he won't know what it is until he says it (93). Talking, actually communicating with another, is thus a way of knowing; and it is also Lance's way of maintaining control over his own life by controlling his own story, which others, such as the media in their misleading newspaper reports, have attempted to appropriate (9, 53, 93).

However, to the extent that Lance's talking does not acknowledge others, it too is a usurpation of knowledge[15] and power. Lance's narrative describes his quest for the knowledge of a "purely evil deed" (45) by employing a kind of inverted religious language. After the "apocalypse" of discovering Margot's adultery, Lance begins a "new life" dedicated to establishing a "new language," based on the genteel and chivalric notions of a kind of old Southern Stoicism (33, 76, 144 - 45). He envisions a "new age" ushered in by revolutionaries who "act with perfect sobriety, reason, and honor" against society's abuses of language: these revolutionaries "will know each other without signs or passwords. No speeches, rallies, political parties. There will be no need of such things" (143). This revolution will appropriately begin with the "good news" of the beginning of a different kind of language, a language as simple as tapping on a wall (75). Unlike Percival, whose vocation is to proclaim the good news with authority, it is instead Lance who "speaks with authority" (146). His message of a new, simple language is enticing (what reader hasn't imagined a society without the double-talk of political parties!); yet it is also ironic because it is delivered in rantings and ravings, which are in a sense as violent as Lance's proposed revolution turns out to be.

This irony becomes more apparent as Lance's message becomes more "prophetic" (205). As Lance "watches and waits" for a "sign," "the great secret of life" is revealed to him: "The secret of life is violence and rape, and its gospel is pornography" (205, 208). Lance goes on to say that "the Jews in the Old Testament know the secret: that man is conceived in sin" (208). Again, Lance's mad ravings about the depravity of man sound strangely convincing, yet the "sane" reader is likely to reject the whole of Lance's message because of its violence upon the reader's sensibilities. At the same time, however, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of Lance's paradoxical genteel prudishness about sex, which makes black-and-white distinctions between ladies and whores (164). Through his ranting and raving, then, Lance exposes the reader to the danger of abstract theorizing about sex, and to the equal but opposite danger of refusing to categorize or place a value on different kinds of sexual acts.

Lance is, however, as much a victim of debased conceptions of language, women and sex, as are the people he kills at the end of the novel. At various times in the novel Percy is careful to point out, apart from any narrator bias, that Lance is victimized by others' ways of communicating. For example, when Lance objects to Merlin and Jacoby's conception of the erotic as "life-enhancing," he is excluded from their group, of which his wife is a part, by their "silence" and "blushes" (102 - 03).[16] Also, though we may not condone Lance's behavior toward Margot before or after his discovery of her adultery, we may yet feel a sense of loss when their "unspoken" bond turns into an estranged "silence" (40, 157, 159). Moreover, Lance is to an extent a victim of his past, which leaves him almost powerless to talk about or explain the present. At one point Lance says that he is staying in the mental hospital until he can decide whether he has "anything to say" about the present (95). Lance's theorizing about original sin is thus an attempt to deal with, to say something about, the inexplicable past and, specifically, about his mother's and father's "secret sin" (86, 197). His account of his great-great-grandfather's violence and silence (140 - 41,

201) further underscores the importance of his almost compulsive speech, which is a means of warding off the influence of the past.

The violence of Lance's ancestry is symbolically passed on to him in the strange hallucination of his mother passing a sword to him, shortly before the climax of the novel (210). Again, Lance's understanding of the significance of the past is obscured, this time by his mother's inaudible words (210). Indeed, the entire sequence of scenes climaxing in the explosion of Belle Isle is shrouded by a kind of silence between the characters as the hurricane roars around them.[17] Unlike the storm silences of *Love in the Ruins*, these "roaring silences" (212) are brilliantly calculated to create not only suspense, but a recognition of the limitation and corruption of human speech, and of the irony of Lance's quasi-religious attempt to revitalize speech and sexuality. In Raine's room, after Lance demonstrates the answer to his previous question, "Is it all buggery once the door is closed?" (120) he says, "I still didn't know. I knew only that it was necessary to know, to know only as the eyes know. The eyes have to know" (221). In an inversion of the doubt of the religious skeptic, Lance must see pure evil with his own eyes before he believes in it. Then, when he discovers his wife in bed with Jacoby, he sees their love-making as a hideous reflection of his inverted religious search and of his dialectic between immanence and transcendence. Lance sees but ironically does not recognize himself in their "divine-obscene" lovemaking: their cries of ecstasy rise like prayers and curses, and they writhe as one Janus-like "beast" (223 - 24). In response to this Lance asks: "What did [the] Jewish Bible say about *all* men being conceived in sin?" (223). Lance obviously does not count himself among the sinful, for he can only think of avenging the "sin" against him. He subsequently commits the ultimate crime against another by literally silencing Jacoby. As Lance cuts his throat, Jacoby's pleading voice horribly comes out of his windpipe "in a rush, not a word" (227). And in Margot's dying words, her voice is also being taken away from her as she attempts to tell Lance of the injustice of his treatment of her: "With you I had to be either -- or -- but never a -- uh -- woman" (230). Lance's either/or conception of sexuality ends with an inversion of Satan's fall, as the house explodes and sends him "wheeling slowly up into the night like Lucifer blown out of hell, great wings spread against the starlight." Lance proclaims that at this moment, he "knew everything" (230).

Lance's "knowledge" is both ironic and unironic. He is like Conrad's Kurtz who has travelled into the "heart of darkness" and has discovered "nothing" (200, 237). He has done away with others in his life and has felt nothing. Or almost nothing: he feels a coldness (236). This coldness leads him to attempt once again to engage Percival in a real dialogue: "Tell me the truth," he asks. "Is everyone cold now or is it only I?" (236). Thus, Lance shows that he is aware enough of his situation to recognize his coldness, while remaining almost totally oblivious to others' feelings. He is aware, also, that something went wrong with his "new life," and that he must find out what so that he "won't make the same mistake twice" (96). But as he envisions another "new beginning" with Anna, he does not realize that his "new language has its limitations." When, for example, he taps on the wall, she respond to a certain point and then "falls silent" (75). Likewise, when at the end of his narration he expects that he and Anna "were going to discover something better" than the "old life" of the "ignominious joy of rape and being raped," he is also wrong (235).

One thing Lance does know is that both he and Percival have changed because of Lance's talking: "while I was talking and changing," he tells Percival, "you were listening and changing" (238). Lance has changed in the sense that he chooses not to be affected by the truth in his narrative. The irony of Lance's request for Percival to tell him the "the truth" is that Lance has already confronted the truth in his narration, and has decided not to acknowledge it. The truth is that Lance and Margot *did* love one another, and that when Lance finally realized this, it was too late. Just before the explosion, Lance remembers the "Sweetness dearness innocence singing laughing" of their love.[18] The next pithy but significant exchange reinforces the fact that Lance had indeed found "knowledge" and "truth." Margot tells Lance that they can start a "new life," and the conversation goes thus:

> Lance: That's true.
> Margot: I know that I know how to and you know that I know how to.
> Lance: Yes.

Lance then comments on this exchange by saying simply "It was true" (228 - 29). The repetition of the words love, true, and know in the entire passage are obvious signs to the reader that Margot and Lance's relationship was more than the sordid affair Lance made it out to be at times. In her last words, Margot gives Lance the knowledge he is seeking, by telling him something he "never knew" -- that he had always treated her either with courtesy, as a Southern lady, or with contempt, as an adulterous whore; but never as a "woman" (230). Then, for the first time since his discovery of her unfaithfulness, Lance sees Margot not as a guilty adulterous partner, but "like Anna" (230). Up to this point Lance had always compared his first, virginal wife, Lucy, with the innocent Anna. Now, Margot becomes the innocent one. It is at this point that the house blows up and Lance says he "knew everything" (230).

At the beginning of the last chapter, however, Lance seems again to have forgotten everything. He is being discharged from the hospital only as a "legally" innocent and sane man; and he is still ironically seeking knowledge in signs: referring to the sign outside his window, he says, "At last I shall know what it says" (233). But Lance does show he has changed by his (somewhat magnanimous) willingness to "wait and give [Percival's] God time" (239). And at the end of the novel,[19] Percival shows he has changed by "looking straight at" Lance and speaking "loud and clear" -- with the authority of an apostle.

In *Lancelot*, Walker Percy has managed to portray language and silence in a kind of symbiotic relationship. Lance's rantings and ravings are part of a mad scheme to revive language and sexuality, but his discourse is also vital to the ultimate recovery of both himself and Percival. And Percival's silence is in part an indication of his own religious crisis, but it too is vital to the recovery of both protagonists.

However, perhaps an equally great achievement of *Lancelot* is its engagement of the reader in both its silences and its mad ravings. By creating a certain amount of uncertainty in the silence of Percival, Percy at first leaves the reader at the mercy of the discourse of a mad narrator. Yet, even though we may deplore Lance's words and actions, we sympathize with his isolation; and even though we realize he is not being totally honest with himself or his auditor, nevertheless "by seeing the whole story through the isolated sufferer's vision we are forced to feel it through his heart" (Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 281).[20] And at the times when Lance seems confused as to the facts of his story, or even deliberately attempts to confuse his auditor (such as when he condemns and then seems to condone pornography, or when he attempts to portray himself in a more positive light than he deserves), he may be testing both Percival's and the reader's convictions about reality and morality. Finally, to the extent that we may agree with some of Lance's strangely seductive theorizing, we ourselves are implicated in his crimes. The dialogue which continues after the end of the novel, then, may be one in which the reader has a vested interest.

NOTES - CHAPTER TWO

1. Percy once told Martin Luschei that his first three novels are a gloss on Kierkegaard and that he would never write another like them (Luschei, 241). But Percy later said this was an exaggeration (Conversations, 203). Thus, although Love in the Ruins shares a philosophical frame of reference with the first two novels, one could argue that, along with Lancelot, it is more properly a part of a phase in Percy's writing career which markedly diverges from his earlier writing.

2. Percy was probably thinking of Flannery O'Connor when he mentioned the bizarre as one of the novelist's tools.

3. The abyss, as we have seen in The Moviegoer and The Last Gentleman, is the vortex of self. Here Tom is pushed to its brink by others.

4. Father Smith is like the reticent Father Weatherbee at the end of The Second Coming. I will not discuss Father Smith's silence here (see LR, 56), but will take it up in chapter three in my discussion of The Thanatos Syndrome.

5. Many critics have pointed out the dialogic nature of Lancelot (see, for example, Daniel, 192; Oliver, 151; Pearson, 61). Percy himself said that the silence of the priest-psychiatrist opens the way for a kind of dialogue (Conversations, 146). And Robert Brinkmeyer quotes Bakhtin's analysis of confession in Dostoevsky: "they (confessions) are nothing other than an event of interaction among consciousnesses ... an encounter of I and other on the highest level or in the ultimate instance" (quoted in Brinkmeyer, 30). While the narration of Lancelot may not be a confession in the Catholic sense, it could be argued that it is in the Dostoevskian sense.

6. Both Lawson (1980, 125) and Daniel (187) call the anti-hero's narrative "seductive."

7. Lancelot Andrewes refers to "the great Anglican divine" (4) whom T.S. Eliot considered "the first great preacher of the English Catholic Church" (quoted in Barrett, 12; see also Eliot's "Journey of the Magi"). Lancelot also refers to "Lancelot du Lac, King Ban of Benwick's son" (4); and, as the name of his auditor (Percival) suggests, to the knight in the legend of King Arthur. Lamar also suggests a Southern politician referred to in Love in the Ruins. Lancelot thus could be read in many ways: as the narration of a "preacher," a warrior, or a red-neck.

8. Percy contradicted the critical opinion that Lance's "little view" shows only that he is a narrow-minded, biased, and unreliable narrator. In an interview Percy points out that Lance's restriction in his little cell is "good," and that the view from Lance's window is a kind of triad: "a corner of the old Lafayette Cemetery, and a slice of the levee, and a slice of a movie theatre -- but you can see a lot, you know. It's a triad." This view reflects Lance's attempt to establish intersubjective communication with Anna: "So this man is in this cell and he likes it there, because it's the purest kind of triadic situation -- an "I" and a "thou," something to look at, and an opportunity to create a language, like Adam and Eve" (Conversations, 140-141). Thus, the fact that Percival also likes Lance's view shows that they are both committed to establishing intersubjective discourse in their relationships with others.

9. Some critics tend to place Lancelot in an entirely negative light and Percival in an entirely positive one. Deborah Barrett, for example, sees Lancelot as "raper" and Percival as "rapee" (10). Michael Pearson further states that Percy and the reader "are forever separated from Lancelot by a wide reach of morality" (62). This view tends to obfuscate the many similarities between Lancelot's opinions and Walker Percy's own views, which are admitted by Percy himself in a long and interesting comparison of Lance with himself in his "Self Interview" (Conversations, 179-181). It is my contention that both Percival and Lancelot are, to a certain extent, reflections of the author himself.

10. Walker Percy once said in an interview that Lancelot is "fundamentally a religious man but can't make head or tail of the usual religious terminology, God and all that, so he turns the whole thing upside down, looking for the holy grail of evil" (Conversations, 155).

11. Lance in fact speaks relatively seldom in his own narrative. It is only in his narration of the story itself that Lance rants and raves.

12. Of Percival's silences Percy said: "I wrote the book [Lancelot] in several versions, and none of them worked. I had two complete characters, long conversations between them. But as soon as the priest opened his mouth it was no damn good. Maybe it's because religious language is shot, just defunct... The trick was to make the priest real without him saying anything, to make his silence operable" (Conversations, 155).

13. The question of the reliability of Lance's narrative remains a matter of critical debate. Two of the most influential critics, however, have come on the side of its general reliability. Lewis A. Lawson states that Lance's narrative is "trustworthy for the recording -- but not the interpretation -- of detail" (1980, 124). Simone Vauthier states that Percival's quiet contributions to the text generally validate Lance's sometimes untrustworthy account (1989, 186). Percy himself states that he was careful to prevent his unreliable narrators from confusing the reader (Conversations, 45), which, one could argue, he did in Lancelot by making Lance a generally reliable narrator as far as the recording of facts is concerned. Lance, moreover, is also somewhat scrupulous in the interpretations of his facts. For example, he ruminates at length about the reasons for his not acknowledging Percival in the hallway (1, 2, 5).

14. Lewis A. Lawson even speculates that Percival is a fellow patient (1980, 126).

15. Cleanth Brooks likens Lance's search for knowledge to a kind of modern-day gnosticism in "Walker Percy and Modern Gnosticism."

16. A similar kind of silence of exclusion also befalls Lance's daughter, Lucy (168). And I have already noted the conversation that transforms Lance into a mere "absence" (43 - 44).

17. The winds of the hurricane may remind us of the "electronic winds" of the videotapes Lance has made. In both instances, silence accompanies the wind. Corinne Dale points out that the passage of Dante's Purgatory from which Percy takes his epigraph for the novel describes the winds of the second circle of hell (104). Percy therefore creates for Lance a kind of hell of noise and silence. Also, the imagery of tongues of fire above the heads of the characters in the videotapes are an ironic reference to the Pentecost of the New Testament, in which people "speak in tongues." Percy uses the same imagery in Love in the Ruins to describe the departure of peoples' souls in a society where there is a confusion of languages (LR, 317).

18. Because these terms describing Lance and Margot's previous relationship are reiterated (unironically, it seems) throughout Lance's narrative, it could be argued that they are indicative of "true" love, even though Lance has supposedly forgotten what true love is.

19. Many critics point out that the true dialogue established at the end of the novel continues after the close of the novel (see Oliver, 17; Brinkmeyer, 41). Critics are divided, however, over the question as to whether Lance ever changes after the end of the novel. Lawson (1980) and Barrett assert that he does not. Percy himself says in an interview that Lance probably goes to Virginia as committed as ever to revolution (Conversations, 210). The text, however, seems more hopeful in stating that Lance has "changed" and is willing "to wait and give [Percival's] God time" (238, 239). Corinne Dale also analyzes the ending of the text in terms of the outcomes of two of the sources it draws on, Dante's Purgatory and the legend of Percival and Lancelot. She concludes that at the end of the novel Lance is suspended "between the moments of revelation" of both Dante and Lancelot.

20. Coincidentally, in his discussion of silence Wayne Booth analyzes the monologue of Albert Camus's The Fall, a book which Percy said influenced him in the writing of Lancelot.

CHAPTER THREE

New Endings:
The Second Coming and *The Thanatos Syndrome*

> Then Jacob asked him, 'Tell me, I pray, your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?'
>
> Genesis 32:29 (RSV)

Walker Percy's last two novels are both sequels: *The Second Coming* (1980) tells us what happens to Will Barrett after the ambiguous close of *The Last Gentleman*; and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987) describes what the life of Tom More is like after the tentatively affirmative ending of *Love in the Ruins*. Percy's fifth and sixth novels are therefore a kind of retelling[1] of two of his previous stories, as if, seeing his professional life drawing to a close, Percy was determined to clarify some of the ambiguities of his earlier novels -- especially the ambiguities of their endings. Despite Will's gloomy prospects at the end of *The Last Gentleman*, we find in *The Second Coming* that he has made a "success" of his life; and despite Tom's seemingly positive prospects at the end of *Love in the Ruins*, we see in *The Thanatos Syndrome* that he continues to make somewhat of a mess of his life.

Percy's last two novels therefore signal a return to and a departure from his earlier fiction. In his later novels, Percy relies just as much, if not more, on the interplay between language and silence to reflect the human condition. Silence is again used to illustrate not only a failure of communication, but the possibility of establishing a new kind of language. The endings of *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, to the extent that they portray Percy's protagonists as successful, are an affirmation of the possibility of a new language. In *The Second Coming*, the relationship of Will and Allie, Percy's most successful couple, progresses with silences and a new way of speaking, and culminates in the beginning of a new kind of community. And in *The Thanatos Syndrome* the reticent Tom More triumphs over all his enemies, wins his wife back, and is ready again to listen to the quiet message of Father Smith.

However, we shall see that the ending of each of these novels is qualified by either its language, or the silences which precede it. In *The Second Coming*, the optimistic language of the ending is qualified by the eerie silences throughout the text, which seem to point out the inherent limitations of language. And in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the success of the protagonist is qualified, in effect, by too many words -- by the propensity of the author to satirize, and by a denouement which drags to a close. Nevertheless, both novels are successful in the extent to which they convey the complexities and ambiguities of existence, and the sense of the conjunction of endings and new beginnings.

Many critics have recognized that *The Second Coming* marks a "new departure" in Percy's fiction. For one, it contains little of the kind of "violence" that pervades *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*.[2] And Percy himself confessed that with *The Second Coming* he was aiming to accomplish something different from his previous novels -- he was hoping to create a "clear resolution" (*Conversations*, 190).

Percy aims for such a clear resolution, however, using the same indirect style that he had by this point perfected. The novel begins enigmatically:

> The first sign that something had gone wrong manifested itself while he was playing golf. Or rather it was the first time he admitted to himself that something must be wrong (3).

Like other Percyan protagonists, "he" is not named until several pages later (9, 13) -- we know only that he is interested in "signs" and that at times, as the second sentence suggests, he lacks a certain amount of self awareness. He also suffers from a medical condition which causes him to perceive things differently and is somehow connected to an event in his past. After falling down in the sand trap at the beginning of the novel, it takes only a slight sound to remind him "of an event that had happened a long time ago. It was the most important event in his life, yet he had managed until that moment to forget it" (3). This last passage ends with an ellipsis, but is sure to be elaborated upon throughout the novel.

Will Barrett's illness raises the inevitable question of who is more crazy, his hero, or the society in which he lives: "Was he crazy or was it rather the case that other people went to any length to disguise from themselves the fact that their lives were farcical? He couldn't decide." And neither will the narrator: "The argument is abstract and useless," he simply says (4). But it is an argument that both Will and the narrator[3] will not be hesitant about taking up throughout the novel.

What is certain is that Percy's protagonists, Will and Allie,[4] perceive that the speech of others only makes "a sort of sense" (6). They live in a society where people "use words as signals" in a code they agree upon. Words are like "the many signboards on the street," to be "either ignored or acted upon" -- they have been divested of value and meaning and thus "do not seem worth uttering," and "often mean their opposites" (31, 75). Language is thus more a part of a stimulus-response nexus, than of the intersubjective process of symbolization. For example, when Allie first escapes from the mental hospital she is struck by how people suppose they know what one means even before one finishes a sentence. Like Pavlov's dogs, they have been conditioned to anticipate the stimulus.

Again, Percy uses names and naming, an integral part of symbolization, to illustrate the degradation of language. The characters in *The Second Coming* tend to disappear into their names -- they are not individual beings capable of a multitudinous variety of unpredictable actions, but rather signs that do no more than what their names signify: Marge Cupp cups her hands, Ed Cupp bunches the fingers of his left hand and drives them up into his right (146, 147).[5] Even Will treats his own daughter in terms of what he thinks her name signifies: he "had always seen her as a *Leslie* ... signifying both prissiness and masculinity" (146). This notion of naming objectivizes others and may even threaten their very existence. Will discovers this at the beginning of the novel, when Ewell McBee narrowly misses shooting him. His bullet grazes Will's calf and stings him like a "buzzing bee" (14). This incident is also akin to the "buzzing" Allie receives at the hands of her doctor, who treats her less as a person than as a "patient."

Paradoxically, Will's interest in signs is both a function of his illness and of his search to recover himself. After the shooting incident with McBee, there occurs a "penultimate quiet" during which Will is "miraculously restored to himself"; he feels "himself to be himself for the first time in years" (14, 15). Will is also somewhat disappointed that it is only Ewell McBee shooting at him, and not an "apocalyptic last-days irruption" (16); for Will is always on the lookout for "signs of the last days." His interest in signs is partly a symptom of his illness, and is so intense at times that the symbolic "distance" between an object and its sign merge, and the "mystery" of both the object and the symbolization process is lost in an endless nexus of signification:

> Today for some reason he remembered everything. Everything he saw became a sign of something else. This fence was a sign of another fence he had climbed through. The hawk was a sign of another hawk.... Even the wheeling blackbirds signified not themselves but a certain mocking sameness.... There [was] no mystery ... (47).

The one thing which remains mysterious for Will, which is still difficult to remember, is "the most important event in his life" alluded to at the opening of the novel. At first the reader is led to believe that this event might be related to his boyhood relationship with Ethel Rosenblum, because Will suddenly remembers Ethel just after the ellipsis concerning "the most important event" (3). Will's acute sexual desire, another symptom of his illness, is connected to a particular meeting with Ethel which is recalled in explicitly sexual terms: they meet on "a wedge-shaped salient of weeds ... shaped like a bent triangle" and overshadowed by a "water tower" (6). On this "unnamed" patch of weeds Will is so overcome with desire for Ethel that he "falls down" (7). The incident seems important because it is the first time Will manifests this particular symptom of his "unnamed" illness (9); but like Lance's recollections in *Lancelot*, the memory of Will's desire for Ethel is only a digression of sorts, a way of not remembering the one important event of his life.

Whereas Will remembers Ethel Rosenblum on the fairway of a golf course, he remembers the one important event in his life only after he slices his golf ball out-of-bounds, away from the "joking" talk of his friends (4) and the "sociable hum of the electric carts" (46; cf. 60). The silence of this place presses in on Will "like soft hands clapped over his ears," and anticipates the memory of the rift in communication between him and his father.[6] Will then remembers the hunting trip to Thomasville, Georgia, on which his father "violated" him. This violation takes the form of a curse and of physical aggression:

> [Will] had gone through the fence, but before he could stand up, the man had grabbed his shoulder in a grip that surprised him not so much for the pain as for the suddenness and violence and with the other hand grabbed the gun up and away from him, swung him around and cursed him. *Goddamn you, haven't I told you how to go through a fence with a loaded shotgun?*(47)

After this Will feels "naked and disarmed," and begins to experience "the first hint of the coolness and curiosity and watchfulness of the rest of his life." Thus, *before* Will is actually shot by his father, their communication is characterized by silence and indirection: in response to his father's observation, made "as if he were speaking to the gun," that he and Will "are the same," Will remains "silent" (50). And it is what happens before the shooting that is described as a violation -- a violation that usurps the normal affection between father and son. Recalling how he never wanted to be hugged or kissed by anyone, especially his father, Will asks:

> *Why?* Why is it that I would not wish then or now or ever to kiss my father? Why is it that it was then and now a kind of violation, not the violation of the man grabbing him across the fence but a violation nevertheless ... what did it signify? (49)

It is the violation that occurs before his father shoots him (51) that seems to begin Will's search for that which "signifies"; but the whole shooting incident is described in such an oddly indirect way, and is connected with so many recurring images and events in the rest of the novel, that the reader is inevitably drawn into Will's search for signs. For example, the reader may have already noticed a connection between the shooting incidents with McBee and with Will's father, both of which leave Will ironically more aware of himself: after the latter incident, Will knows "that he is free to act ..."; he finds "the hard secret core of himself" (52, 53).[7] There may also be a more implicit connection between the incident with Ethel Rosenblum, which takes place on an "untenanted" patch of ground, and the shooting incident with Will's father, which is remembered throughout the novel as Will crosses into the out-of-bounds zone of the golf course. This connection would be in keeping with the theme of love-and-death in the novel, and with the disturbing sexual imagery used to describe Will's search for explanations of the shooting.

This search, of course, is connected to Will's relationship with Allie. Will meets Allie for the first time after an imaginary conversation with his father in the silence of the out-of-bounds area (67). Will thinks that if his father would only tell him why he shot his son, then Will would have a chance to escape the same violent means which his father chose as a way out of the world: "as if by the mere telling," Will says, "it would not then have to happen to me" (56). Will counts on his father's words, but the tension between silence and "telling" in the passage (64 - 67) finally culminates in the father's "Silence." However, the silence also signifies the beginning of a new kind of discourse between Will and Allie. Immediately after his father's refusal to answer him, Will meets Allie, and, listening to Allie's "odd" speech, suddenly becomes "aware of himself" (70). "For the first time in years," Will thinks excitedly, "he knew exactly what was what and what he intended to do. He remembered everything" (71). This epiphany is ironic because, like other Percy heroes, Will must be continually reminded of his search in order to continue undertaking it. This is not the only time he seems to know what to do (cf. 113, 135, 154); but it is the beginning of the idea of Will's cave venture, which is a search for a sign of God, and eventually leads him back to Allie. Despite the irony of the passage, Allie is an important sign in Will's search; for after meeting her, he experiences the same symptoms which are related to his propensity to see and interpret signs -- he remembers "everything" (72; cf. 47).

Like Will, Allison Huger is the victim of paternal oral aggression. In his capacity as dentist, her father practices a kind of violence on others, first by literally silencing them, and then by expressing his own "passionate and insane views on every subject" (93); but all the while his rage is communicated with a grinning smile, for "all his expressions, even frowns, occurred within the smile" (93). When Will meets Allie's father, he notices that the grin "went back to the eyeteeth," and asks himself: "What's this guy so angry about? His wife? Being a dentist? His daughter? No wonder his daughter is nuts" (130). Both Kitty and Walter Huger are like Daisy and Tom Buchanan in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, "leaning forward" and "laying hands on" others, and assaulting others with their speech (120).[8] Thus, when Allie is with her parents "it didn't matter what she said. It was like being alone in a great echoing cave" (93 - 94).

The whole notion of the cave, then, is related to the theme of orality that runs through *The Second Coming*.[9] One of the first things we hear about Lost Cove cave is that the remains of an ancient saber-toothed tiger were once discovered in its depths, connecting the image of the cave with the large eye-toothed Walter Huger, whom Kitty calls "Tiger" (109). Yet the tiger and the cave are for Percy not signs in the sense of denoting one thing and one thing only; they are symbols, which of their nature are mysterious and may connote many things. Thus, there are actually several tigers in the novel. The first is the real saber-toothed tiger which has been removed from the cave, but which nevertheless remains fascinating and generates various metaphors, the comparison with Walter Huger being one of them. The tiger is also described as Blake's Tyger at one point (168); and there is a rock in the cave that looks like a tiger's skull, with a "lip of bone on each side where the massive jaw muscle attached" (191). But when Will begins hallucinating in the cave, it is neither of these tigers he sees; it is rather a "commonplace" tiger, not "bright or fearful or symmetrical," but nevertheless somehow still unclassifiable simply as a tiger: his hide is like that of a "rhinoceros" or "locust"; and he makes a rustling sound like "wasps in a gourd" (201 - 02). As Will attempts to interpret the significance of the imaginary tiger, he thinks "Tiger or no tiger, it's all the same.... [It] was no sign" (202).[10]

Inasmuch as the cave is a symbol of orality, then, Percy's symbolization seems to be a comment on the language of his age. To the extent that the characters in *The Second Coming* forfeit the uniquely human ability to symbolize, they live inauthentic, "animal" lives,[11] or what Will calls a "death in life." Percy's wish to portray the morbidity of this death in life may explain his interweaving of sexuality and orality, both of which may be a kind of death in life. Will's cave experiment is thus in a sense both a death and rebirth. The cave, after all, apparently has only two entrances, one natural, with a river flowing out of it, and one "man-made or at least man-shaped" (190); and Will enters the cave through the latter entrance, in the silence of the out-of-bounds area and "like a baby getting through a pelvis" (190). But his trip into the cave is also described as going "under the earth" with his dead father, whom he (like Hamlet) calls the "old mole" (196). Will is also like Jacob (175), wrestling with a silent God Who would not tell Jacob His name and could easily have killed him, but Who nevertheless gives Jacob a new name.[12] Like Jacob's, Will's physical handicap has to do with the pelvis, that part of the anatomy which symbolizes his desire for women: he remembers Ethel Rosenblum standing, "hip hiked out, one fist perched cheerleader wise on her pelvis" (7); and the aggressive yet nevertheless seductive Kitty "jostles" Will with her hip (148). Yet desire is connected with orality and death in Will's memory of his wife. Marion "ate and ate and ate" until "she grew too heavy for her hip," and "the ball of her femur drove into the socket of her pelvis" (143). Eventually, Marion's "cliffs of ocherous fat" breed disease, and she dies "with the quietness of people after a storm which had drowned out their voices" (144, 114).

In the cave, Will equates sex with the memory of the near-death experience of his father's shooting (Ed Barrett aimed to kill both Will and himself):

> The boy lay prone in the Georgia swamp, watchful and silent, unwounded cheek pressed against the ground, the Sterlingworth shotgun cradled in his arms. Ground fog lay straight as milk, filling the hollows between the pin oaks. So this is how it is, the boy thought, grim and exultant. This is one of the secrets nobody tells you. There are two secrets to life nobody tells you: screwing and dying (198).

The sexual imagery of "hollows" and "pin oaks" and "milky fog" is obvious, and the fog is a repetition of a previous passage which relates Will's memory of Ethel Rosenblum to the incident with his father. As a silent, white cloud of fog "presses in" upon Will's house, he remembers the triangular patch of land where he wanted to make love to Ethel: "It was the very sort of place, a ... public pubic sort of place, to make a sort of love or die a sort of death" (148). Then he asks his dead father: "Did you not then believe, old mole, that these two things alone are real, loving and dying ...?" to which his father responds again only with "Silence" (148).

Will's cave experiment is thus an attempt to come to terms with the silences in his life: the silence of God, the silence of his father, and the silences between him and his wife and daughter. Immediately after he remembers the shooting, he remembers also a conversation he had with his daughter Leslie, in which she pointed out that neither Will nor Marion "was ever honest with the other" (199). This charge is corroborated by Will earlier in the story, when he admits that he and Marion had a "communication breakdown" (140). The same lack of communication exists between him and Leslie, as Will also admits: "Maybe there had been a time when there was something to say [to Leslie] and maybe the time would come again, but it was not now" (132). Will even admits that his leaving Leslie before her wedding to go to the cave, may be a kind of re-enactment of what his father did to him: "Am I doing to her exactly what he did to me, leaving her?" he asks himself (132).

Will's fall into Allie's greenhouse is in a sense a "breaking into the daylight of language," in the same sense as Val's Tyree children come to language in *The Last Gentleman*. His "transformation" and "rebirth" (207) into a new world of symbolization is itself symbolized by the reincarnation, so to speak, of the tiger in Allie's stove: "a fire burned behind [the grate of the stove] bright as tigers' eyes" (207). Will and Allie's new kind of dialogue has been prepared for not only by the silences and ordeal of the cave, but by the silences of their previous meetings. Their communication at that time is marked by a concern for "saying and not saying" (98). During their second meeting, the silences within their conversation are at first not negative:

> It was not for [Allie] like a silence with another person, a silence in which something horrid takes root and grows. What if nobody says anything, what then? Sometimes she thought she had gone crazy rather than have to talk to people. Which was worse, their talk or their silences? (99)

Allie wishes Will would leave, however, when their conversation no longer carries the weight of their silences: "Maybe it is easier to be crazy than to put up with people's pauses. Suppose he didn't leave. He left. Whew" (103).

After Will falls into Allie's greenhouse, they find a way to communicate in which the intervening silences of their conversation lead to a more intersubjective communication;[13] and they can do this, as Allie says in her unique way, because their "silence didn't sprout and looks didn't dart" (229). In their relationship there are not only intervening silences, but also a silence conveying the sense of both a beginning and an ending -- "a penultimate hush marking the beginning and end" (234). The term "penultimate hush" has been used before in the context of the ordeal of Will being shot at by Ewell McBee, after which he comes to himself. Here it seems to suggest the end of Will and Allie's solitary existence, and the possibility of a new relationship between them. It also anticipates a kind of verbal climax which is about to take place. This climax can only occur after Will acknowledges and reiterates that he "doesn't know" what to do or say -- or rather, that in the cave he learned what to do, but that he doesn't know how to say it (235, 236). He falls silent for a time; but then he proceeds to tell Allie about his cave experience (236 - 37), not in his old way of speaking, but in her way, which is "new and unformed" (100): Allie notes that his voice "reminded her of her own rehearsed sentences" (237). The reader is not privy to all of Will's exact words, but neither is Allie:

> When he began to talk she found that she could not hear his words for listening to the way he said them.... Though he hardly touched her, his words seemed to flow across all parts of her body.... A pleasure she had never known before bloomed deep in her body. Was this a way of making love?

Will's words are a kind of coalescence of opposites: "yours," "mine"; "above," "below"; "God," "her"; "forgetting," "remembering" -- and, of course, Will, Allie; for just as Will has added to the inventory of Allie's "rehearsed language," so he borrows her way of speaking. After a brief dialogue following this coalescence, there is an intervening lull in their conversations, during which Will "was silent for a long time" (237); and then the coalescence continues (238).

Percy had set for himself a very difficult task in *The Second Coming*, which was basically to reinvent the language of love.[14] He seemed to have carried out his task, however, not with the naive hope of accomplishing it, but with the realization of the limitations of language. This would explain Will's "silent" words in the passage just described, as well as Allie's difficulty with defining the act of love in anything other than "sappy" terms. When Will asks her to describe what lovers do, Allie says "They become one but not in the sappy way of saying." When Will asks her to elaborate, she says "One plus one equals one and oh boy almond joy" (238). The limitations of this new kind of language are most clearly indicated when, after the noise of the thunderstorm drowns out their words, Will suddenly leaves Allie (239 - 40).[15]

After leaving the greenhouse, Will is consigned to a morbid kind of silent existence. He is almost immediately reminded of the ordeal of his father's death and of the silences between father and son that preceded it (244 - 45). He sees himself in the mirror of his Mercedes as "hollow-eyed as a Dachau survivor" (243). The only thing which seems to signify in his life is death: Will wonders if he is not "bred for death as surely as a pointer bitch to point" (245). This image of pointing refers back to the shooting incident and recurs throughout the novel as an illustration of the corrupt nature of signs in Will's society. Upon returning to his house and finding that his daughter has closed it and left it "dark and silent," Will concludes that places "do not have significances" (261). In his search for a sign that life is indeed possible, Will then attempts to return to the place of the shooting incident, only almost to be killed on the bus trip there. As he disembarks from the bus, the driver maliciously accelerates and Will is dragged "fast and silent" across the pavement of the highway (271). Like Tom More in *Love in the Ruins*, Will is then consigned to the quiet life of a patient, watching T.V. with his fellow patients in silence (290).

At this point Will is considered to be "healthy," his sickness having subsided because of medical treatment; it is only when he is "sick," when he forgets to take his pills, that he finally remembers that he actually witnessed his father's suicide:

> ... my being at his death and his wanting me to be there, his wanting me to see his brain exploded, expanding like stars in the night sky. Why did he want me to be there? To show me what? Now I know. To show me the one sure sweet exodus ... now at least I know.... I thought I survived and I did but I've been dead of something ever since and didn't know it until now.... Ah, but there is a difference between feeling dead and not knowing it, and feeling dead and knowing it (295).

For the first time, Will knows that there is a possibility he may yet truly live. He recognizes that there may be "a whole world of meaning, of talking and listening ... which no one paid attention to ..." (296).

Will immediately seeks out Allie, and they begin a new life together (301) in which Will finds that he knows what to say and do, and Allie finds she can tell others what to do (312, 313). Tempted one last time by his father's beckoning "Come" (306 - 07),[16] Will crosses the triangular patch of grass at the back corner of the Holiday Inn and throws his guns over the lookout and into the gorge below. Neither of the guns make a sound (308). Will then meets with the reticent Father Weatherbee, an unlikely apostle with a "spinning eye," [17] to discuss his marriage to Allie. In this meeting Will asks himself, "What is it I want from [Allie] and him ... not only want but must have? Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading in this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have" (323). The novel thus ends with Will living up to his name.

This ending, however, is somehow unsatisfactory. There is a certain outlandishness, after all, in Will and Allie's scheme to "farm in cave air" (320). And whether Percy describes God masquerading in Father Weatherbee, or in the "fakery and fondness" of hospital orderlies (318), the persistently morbid sexual imagery of the rest of the novel carries into its close. The dying old lady whom the orderlies place on a stretcher, for example, elicits this thought from Will: "ah, I know what that feels like, to be taken care of by strong quick sure hands at one's hips" (317). The reader could perhaps dismiss such a comment if it were not for the incest motif[18] which is still unresolved at the novel's end. Will's relationship with Allie at the end of the novel is a strange one, for he is both her lover and her legal guardian (cf. 238); and Allie is "like a child" who "clings" to Will (306, 308). The reader is reminded of numerous passages which refer to Will as a kind of father-figure to Allie: she first sees him wearing pants "like her father's" (97); she wants to ask him at one point whether he is her "lover" or her "father" (99); Will is in a sense a replacement for "Sarge," Allie's previous boyfriend and father-figure (234); and when Allie asks Will if he definitely knows that he is *not* her father, he simply responds with "I don't know" (235). Just as disturbing is Percy's characterization of Allie as a "boy" (24, 69, 328), which, if Will is her father-figure, would make their relationship analogous to the relationship between Will and his father.

The Second Coming is thus Percy's most complex, most ambiguous and even ambivalent[19] treatment of language and silence. To a greater extent than in any other novel, Percy pushes the language of his text to the threshold of the unspeakable in human relationships, by relating the themes of sexuality, orality, and death in an intricate pattern of images: the shotgun blast of Ewell McBee, who had first shown Will how to "jerk off" (18); the cave as oral cavity, vagina/uterus, or place of death; the gluttony of Marion, and her "glittering lover's eyes" and "sparkling diamonds" of cholesterol shortly before her death (144); the "coming" of a double-barreled shotgun in the mouth, brain exploding and "plastering the attic" with neurons like stars in the night sky" -- all these images combine to create a disturbing portrait of human relationships. The images of glittering, sparkling or blooming, in particular, work against the intersubjectivity that Will and Allie attain in the glittering, diamond-like greenhouse. Silence in *The Second Coming* is therefore not only an initiation and elaboration of a new way of speaking, but also (and perhaps primarily) an indication of the corruption in human relationships and in language. The reaffirmation of community at the end of the novel is thus unconvincing. But then, after all, perhaps this was Percy's intention.

Walker Percy's last novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, is the one in which he seems to be the most free with his words -- it is his longest novel and, while it carries us along with the pace of a thriller, it is written in a relatively easy and relaxed style. Although *The Thanatos Syndrome* deals with the same serious theme of euthanasia as its forerunner, *Love in the Ruins*, it contains none of the overpowering satire of Percy's third novel; and while it speaks about incest in a much more explicit manner than *The Second Coming*, Percy's last novel balances the horror of child abuse with a conclusion in which Percy's hero unequivocally triumphs over his enemies. For the first and what would be the only time, Percy's protagonist is less involved with his own search than with resolving the problems of others. In Percy's words, he had moved from the "futuristic gimmickry" of Tom's lapsometer in *Love in the Ruins*, to his "somewhat old-fashioned," "practical" psychoanalysis in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, which is based on "talking and listening to people, [but] mostly listening" (interview with Phil McCombs, 824).

The Thanatos Syndrome opens with a typical Percyan hero who is "onto something." Tom More has discovered something both "mysterious" and "ominous" (2), and he relates this to us, not in a frantic way as in *Love in the Ruins*, but in the relaxed manner of a dispassionate scientist. Tom tells us of the motto he follows: "A great scientist once said that genius consists not in making great discoveries but in seeing the connection between small discoveries" (1). Tom then digresses to tell us of a physician he once knew who stopped an outbreak of the plague by "pricking up his ears" to listen to the symptoms of his patients (1 - 2). When he gets back to telling us about his own "hunch," he deliberately leaves out information about himself which may relate to his search for a clue to the "mystery": "The other day ... I was seeing a patient I hadn't seen for two years. I've been away, but that's another story ..." (3). As all ellipses at the beginning of Percy novels, this one concerns a life-changing ordeal which the protagonist experienced. Tom will briefly refer back to this ordeal several times throughout the course of the novel (9, 23, 46, etc.), but at the moment he is more interested in relating the case of one of his psychiatric patients, Mickey Lafaye.

During Tom's sessions with Mickey, he keeps "his eyes and ears open" and "hears what is not said" (3). Mickey suffers from a "nameless" disorder -- or more precisely a disorder that is variously named, but the names "don't help much" (4) -- which is characterized by anxiety and depression. As Tom visits her in the hospital, however, he finds that these symptoms have apparently disappeared and been replaced by lascivious behavior and dissociated speech. After leaving Mickey, Tom comments on the limitations of psychiatry to "make any sense at all" of human behavior (9), and then describes his own theory of human nature as it relates to more scientific, behavioral approaches:

> We, who like our mentor Dr. Freud believe there is a psyche, that it is born to trouble as the sparks fly up, that one gets at it, the root of trouble, the soul's own secret, by venturing into the heart of darkness, which is to say, by talking and listening, mostly listening, to another troubled human for months, years -- we have been mostly superseded by brain engineers, neuro-pharmacologists, chemists of the synapses. Any why not? If one can prescribe a chemical and overnight turn a haunted soul into a bustling little body, why take on such a quixotic quest as pursuing the secret of one's very self? (12)

The entire plot of the novel revolves around precisely this last question.

Although Tom says he hasn't much use for religion (48), he defines his "faith" and "beliefs" in terms of the existence of the human soul and of the importance of intersubjectivity for the health of the soul. Tom states that he is "a psyche-iatrist, an old-fashioned physician of the soul" who got his "psychiatric faith" from the "secret belief" of Harry Stack Sullivan: "*Each patient ... even some psychotics, has the means of obtaining what he needs, she needs, with a little help from you*" (15, 16).[20] Tom describes this creed as "the pearl of great price," "the treasure buried in a field" -- talking and listening to others and rendering "the unspeakable speakable" (17).[21]

Language is thus a uniquely human means of recovering self-awareness -- what Tom calls "the old ache of self" (92); but it may also be a means of covering up "the heart of darkness" which is the self. Human beings naturally use language to come to a point of "self-consciousness," to reach "the 'I', the 'utterer,' the 'self'" (22 - 23); but at times they just as naturally attempt to fill the "abyss" of the self with aggressive speech or violent actions, because "arguing, violent disagreement, even war" is better than "nothing" (37; cf. 179). Anxiety and depression may therefore be of value to the individual in showing one the nothingness and darkness of one's self without others (72). Tom posits that if science was able to take away "such peculiarly human symptoms as anxiety, depression, stress, insomnia, suicidal tendencies, chemical dependence," one would inevitably see "a regression from a stressful human existence to a peaceable animal existence" (195). And this is exactly what he sees in his patients, who show no signs of their previous symptoms but copulate like animals and lose the ability to speak properly.

Unlike other Percy heroes, Tom takes decisive action in his search to discover the reason for his patient's change; but Tom is a typically Percy hero in that he is subject to some of the same "peculiarly human symptoms" for which he treats his patients. At the end of *Love in the Ruins*, we see Tom with a new family, making love with Ellen on their "Sears best" bed. But as Tom begins to fill in the ellipses of the opening of the novel, we realize he has spent the last two years in prison, apparently for selling prescription drugs illegally to make extra money to support his failing practice (27 - 28). Later, however, it is hinted that Tom went to prison as a way out of the "terror" of ordinary life (114, 95). In any case, he has this to say about his prison stay:

> In a word, prison restored my humanity if not my faith, I still don't know what to make of God, don't give Him, Her, It a second thought, but I make a good deal of people, give them considerable thought. Not because I'm more virtuous, but because I'm more curious. I listen to them carefully, amazed at the trouble they get into and how few quit.

The ordeal of prison life thus gave Tom a certain amount of concern for others, even though, ironically, it doesn't improve his communication with his family. "My children don't know what to say to me," Tom bluntly confesses. "They look and talk past me ..." (40, 41). Tom tries to justify the lack of communication between him and his children by pointing out that the call "Communicate!" that psychologists have given to parents has become a cliché, or what he calls "psycho-crap": "If I sat Tommy down and said, Son, let's have a little talk, it would curdle him and curdle me, and it should" (45). Of course, Tom is correct to a certain extent; but later, when he is in danger of losing custody of his kids to the sinister Van Dorn, he realizes he "could use more parenting skills" (222). Likewise, the possibility of losing his wife, Ellen, is also attributable to Tom's failure as a husband, as well as to the sinister plottings of Bob Comeaux and John Van Dorn. Nevertheless, the fact that both the narrator and the author are almost totally silent about Tom's feelings concerning the discovery of his wife's sexual promiscuity (60, 161), speaks of his pain more than any explanation the text could make.

Although Tom often says he is a listener, and is often shown to be helping others by listening to them (36, 114), he is ironically just as often not listening to others -- especially when it is vital that he should. When his cousin, Lucy Lipscomb, attempts to explain to him the dangers of dealing with Bob Comeaux, Tom finds it "difficult to listen" (111). And when Van Dorn tells Tom about his theory of "science and sexuality," and thus gives Tom an unmistakable clue as to the goings on at Belle Ame Academy, Tom is also "not listening" (228).

The most important failure on Tom's part to listen, however, involves his communication with Father Simon Ricardo Smith, Percy's most developed priest character. Like Saint Simeon the Stylite, Father Smith has retreated to a six-foot by six-foot lookout atop a fire tower, where he looks not only for signs of fire, but for signs that signify. He speaks in an almost arbitrary fashion -- one moment with a "lively" voice, the next with a "careless musing voice," then with an "old priest-friend-colleague voice" -- as if the form of his language doesn't much matter (127, 128).[22] Father Smith proclaims in a "brisk rehearsed voice" that even "if the existence of God, heaven, hell, sin were all proved as certainly as the distance to the sun is proved, it would make no difference" because "words no longer signify" (129). Tom meanwhile keeps his voice attentive "without paying close attention," and is all too willing to place the priest in the "category of nut," especially when Father Smith begins speaking of the Holocaust and the Jews as "the only sign of God which has not been evacuated" (131, 132, 134). Even when Father Smith draws a comparison between the Holocaust and the indifference of the present-day scientific community to euthanasia, and aims the azimuth[23] directly at Tom, Tom remains oblivious to the significance of Father Smith's warning (138 - 139).

Tom is thus implicated in Father Smith's denunciation of the silence of the scientific community on the euthanasia controversy. When, after his first meeting with Father Smith in the fire tower, Tom listens to Bob Comeaux's plan to change society by altering the human brain, he notes the idealism of Comeaux's account but remains silent (211). And when Tom does raise objections to Bob Comeaux's advocacy of euthanasia, Comeaux ironically points out that Tom's work on ionization is largely responsible for Comeaux's and Van Dorn's work. "So for better or worse, Doctor," says Comeaux to Tom, "it appears you're one of us." To which Tom replies, "So it seems" (216, 217).

As the action of the novel continues, Percy uses silence to heighten the suspense (e.g. 191, 192), as he does in *Love in the Ruins*; but he also uses it to describe Tom's realization of what his membership in the scientific community means. After Tom finally realizes that Ellen has been exploited by Van Dorn, the "Renaissance Man" and "Nuclear Wizard," Tom is too stunned to answer Lucy's question concerning what he is going to do about his wife's situation (161). And after Lucy's horrific discovery of child abuse at Belle Ame, Tom is still silent, not knowing what to do (247). At this point Tom is less like the confident doctor ready to listen to his patients and take action toward their betterment, than like the patients he describes who "do not know who they are or what to do with themselves" (95).

Strangely, before Tom does take action to stop the abuse at Belle Ame, he visits Father Smith once again in the fire tower, and the building suspense of the novel is suddenly suspended. After they sit in silence for a time, with the azimuth between them (252), Tom tells Father Smith about Comeaux's and Van Dorn's project of "social betterment," and of the sexual molestation at Belle Ame, stating also that he doesn't know what he should do (253). Tom concludes by saying that the scientific results of the project (a reduction in street crime, substance abuse, etc.) are impressive and their rationale, the society's survival, justifiable. Father Smith then sets the sights of the azimuth on Tom again, and begins to tell Tom of an hallucination he experienced. "Suddenly," Tom reports, "I don't want to talk or listen" (254). It is not until the priest's voice becomes barely audible that Tom realizes he may have something important to say (258).

What follows is "Father Smith's Confession," in which he tells of his experience as a young man in pre-World War Two Germany.[24] In his "strange, rambling" account, he remembers how the German scientific community, which read Goethe and listened to Schubert and was in every way highly cultured, began advocating euthanasia. Like Tom, Father Smith confesses that "their arguments made considerable sense to me" (267). He tells also of a young SS man who befriended him and gave him a sword engraved with the motto "*Blut* und *Ehre*" (Blood and Honor).

Then Father Smith tells Tom, "This is my confession. If I had been German not American, I would have joined ... the Schutzstaffel. Listen. Do you hear me? *I would have joined him*" (269). Just as Tom is implicated in the morally questionable schemes of the scientific community, so Father Smith is implicated in the evil of what was about to happen in Germany; but, unlike Tom, he recognizes and confesses his complicity.

After Father Smith finishes his confession, he is disappointed to see that Tom responds to it only as a scientist, that Tom "is more interested in his story as a symptom of a possible brain disorder than in the actual events which he related" (273). Father Smith then takes it upon himself to add a "footnote" to his confession, in which he adds that, while fighting the war against Germany, he liberated a hospital, the head of which was the cultured German doctor with whom he stayed before the war. A nurse led him to the room in which sick children were put to death with Zyklon B gas:

> ... there seemed nothing particularly horrifying about her showing me the "special department" -- that is, she was not horrified nor was I, at the time. It was a matter of some interest. Soldiers are interested, not horrified. Only later was I horrified. We've got it wrong about horror. It doesn't come naturally but takes some effort.

Father Smith is making an obvious point about human nature and the banality of evil,[25] which Tom nevertheless misses. He asks whether the evil acts perpetrated during the war were peculiar to the Nazis, or the Germans, or psychiatrists; or whether they were somehow "demonic," to which the priest laughs and asks Tom the question: "Do you think we're different from the Germans?" Tom still claims ignorance, and Father Smith ends the conversation by saying "In the end one must choose ... life or death" (278).

Tom's subsequent reticence and action shows, however, that speaking with Father Smith has somehow prepared him to "know what to do." As Tom, Uncle Hugh Bob, and Vergil approach Belle Ame, Tom notes that Vergil "is worried about me, my silence. Do I know what I'm doing?" (307) Both Vergil and the uncle take notice, however, when Tom suddenly assumes a voice of authority, and orders Mrs. Cheney to summon Van Dorn and his "gang" (310). Tom's silence from that point also assumes authority, and contrasts to the ironic sense of propriety of Van Dorn and the other child abusers. At the beginning of the confrontation of the two parties, Tom records: "There follows a period of social unease, like a silence at a dinner party. But Van Dorn goes on nodding good-naturedly, as if agreeing with something. Vergil, hands on knees, shoots a glance at me. I am silent ..." (318; cf. 319, 320). Van Dorn, a sinister figure at the beginning of the novel, is now a rather banal character concerned as much that no one, including Tom, should be embarrassed during their confrontation. When Tom produces the pornographic pictures, Van Dorn and the others look at them "politely" (322). Ironically, Mrs. Cheney, the proper middle-aged lady who appears in some of the photographs, exclaims in "conventional outrage, touching her tight bun at her neck'": "Dr. More! You ought to be ashamed!" (324) What follows are some of the funniest passages in Percy's fiction, in which, among other things, his hero's nose starts running, two of the child molesters are shot (but not seriously), and all of Van Dorn's gang is reduced to an animal state by a dose of their own "medicine," so to speak. The story reaches a climax when, despite their having regressed to an animal state, Van Dorn and the others still exhibit socially acceptable behavior as the sheriff and his deputies arrive; but just as it seems like Tom is the one who will be arrested, Van Dorn goes "ape" (346).[26]

At the point in the novel where the sinister Van Dorn is simply turned into an animal -- or even before that point when Tom meets with Father Smith again and carries on a long dialogue -- the reader may very well complain that Percy has needlessly or clumsily deflated the rising suspense of the novel, and has allowed his serious themes to give way to satire or low comedy. However, Percy seems to be making a statement not about the demoniacal or sinister quality of evil, but about its banality. The sheriff's refusal to arrest Van Dorn despite seeing the evidence of the photographs; Uncle Hugh Bob's excitement at seeing Mrs. Cheney raise her skirt and "present" herself; Vergil's polite insistence on remaining ignorant as much as possible as to the activities of the child abusers -- all of these responses to the child abusers make the other members of society in some sense complicit in society's evils. Evil hides under the cover of propriety. After Tom presents the pornographic photographs to Max Gottlieb and Bob Comeaux, and as the latter peruse them "politely," Tom is again struck by the photographs' "Victorian propriety" and "decorous expressions." What remains inexplicable for Tom "is the proper pleased children --" (358); he can talk about them only by assuming his "clinical voice," which somehow renders the subject matter of the photographs more expressible in public (358).

The long denouement of the story begins after Tom, with new authority, disposes of Bob Comeaux as a threat.[27] The next fifty pages or so are dedicated to telling us what happens to major and minor characters alike, and is almost chatty at points.[28] Ellen comes back to Tom in a kind of repetition, but she remains "puzzled, distant, and mostly silent" until the More family embarks on a rotation down the "American Road" (364 - 68), where husband and wife make love on the bed of their motor home, which is even "bigger than Sears best." Tom finds, with a certain amount of dismay, that he is "beginning to think like Father Smith" (368), and continues to embarrass his colleagues by repeating the warning that science may very well "end by killing Jews" (382). Father Smith continues his "gnomic" utterances and silence (392, 399), and confronts Tom with the same kind of "either/or" choice as in the fire tower before Tom defeats his enemies (399; 278). And Tom chooses to help Father Smith with communion, but otherwise remains uncommitted to religion, which Percy said elsewhere was a kind of hint to the reader.[29]

Thus, *The Thanatos Syndrome* ends with a kind of ambivalence toward language, with Percy telling and not telling. In Father Smith's recollection of the Holocaust, and in Tom's final reticence about the attitude of the children in the photographs, lies the recognition of the limitation of art and language to convey certain aspects of human nature and experience. As another writer puts it: "We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning"; we know also "that words have failed us, that art can neither stem barbarism nor convey experience when experience grows unspeakable" (Steiner, ix, 139).

The sheer wordiness of Percy's last novel, however, seems to qualify or even in a sense defy such dire conclusions. It is as though, seeing his writing career coming to an end, Percy was reluctant to end or place many limitations on his novel. *The Thanatos Syndrome* is in an important sense nostalgic -- as Tom says, "like the old days" (400) -- combining and restating in its pages as many old themes from previous novels as possible. It is thus appropriate that the novel ends where it begins, with Mickey Lafaye once again entering Tom's office exhibiting the same uniquely human symptom of anxiety, and beginning a dialogue, with Tom speaking and listening -- but mostly listening (404).

NOTES - CHAPTER THREE

1. Percy would no doubt object to the claim that his novels are simply "retellings" of his previous novels, just as he objected to the term "sequel" being applied to either of his last novels. However, I am not intending to argue that The Second Coming and The Thanatos Syndrome are simply retellings, but rather that they are retellings in the sense of their clarification and elaboration of some of the ambiguities of his earlier texts.

2. See John Crowley's introduction to Critical Essays on Walker Percy for a synopsis of the reviewers' immediate recognition of the divergence of The Second Coming from the rest of Percy's novels. The observation on violence is made by one of Percy's interviewers, Marc Kirkeby, who also strangely states that The Second Coming (the very title of which conveys the sense of immanence) does not convey a sense of foreboding (Conversations, 190). However, in connection with the violence which we see in the previous two novels -- and which is, to some extent, related to the anger of the author himself -- James Atlas points out Percy's continued anger in The Second Coming against an age which Percy called the "century of the love of death." This assumed anger may be a motivation for writing some of the "tirades" that we find in The Second Coming (Conversations, 183). Percy himself seems to contradict this assessment of his novel in a later interview, when he says of The Second Coming: "It has a feeling of affirmation, of celebration. I've never done this before. I feel better about it" (Conversations, 197). As we shall see, while the novel does have an affirmative ending, Percy was perhaps being his usual modest and sly self by not dwelling on the complexities of his novel, which may not be apparent to the reader looking only for a "celebration" of life.

3. Unlike the ironic narration in The Last Gentleman, it is almost impossible to differentiate at times between the views of the narrator and the protagonist of The Second Coming. The narrator does ironize Will's plight throughout the novel (for example, the narrator slyly points out that Will sees other people's self-deception but does not recognize his own [4]); but the frequency with which the narration switches from third- to first-person indicates a greater sympathy between the narrator and Will (and between the narrator and Allie).

4. Of course, the two protagonists of The Second Coming are another reason why this novel is a departure for Percy. Sometimes charged with misogyny, Percy here creates a relatively believable female character who shows some independence from the hero, and who almost gets as much space dedicated to her as her male counterpart. Allie's observations about language, moreover, seem even more important than Will's because she is in many ways a more self-aware, more stable character in her detached relationship with society. Her illness, then, is also an ironic comment on society.

5. One of the most common criticisms of Percy's fiction is that his characters are not "round" enough, and tend toward caricature. As we see here, in at least some cases this may be Percy's intention.

6. As in The Moviegoer, the recollection of the protagonist's father is "framed" in silence: the scene of Will's memory of the shooting begins and ends with "roaring silence" (46, 55).

7. Will's ability to "know" and "do" is ironic because it is clear that he does not know what to do until the end of the novel.

8. A few passages from Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (Scribner's, 1953) will serve to illustrate the similarity between Kitty and Walter Huger and Daisy and Tom Buchanan:

> Now [Tom] was a sturdy straw-haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth.... Two shining arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and [he] gave the appearance of always leaning aggressively (5).... Daisy seized upon the momentary interruption and leaned toward me [Nick Carraway, the narrator].... she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face ... (10, 12).

9. At the end of Lost in the Cosmos, Percy uses some of the same oral imagery as in The Second Coming. After a nuclear holocaust, his characters start a new life at Lost Cove cave, where in one scene some of them celebrate communion while others, including the protagonist, drink whiskey. That Percy also intended Ewell McBee in The Second Coming to be associated with orality is reinforced by his creation of a "Jason McBee" in Lost in the Cosmos, whose whiskey is "a mellow-gold confection, aged in the wood, smooth as honey ..." (153). Ewell's shooting at Will Barrett may then have an indirect connection to Will's father's suicide, which is performed by a shotgun in his mouth (136).

10. In fact, when Will is able to "remember everything" and everything becomes a sign for something else, the tiger still remains an enigma for him (47). It then also may be a symbol of his father, who Will says is "the only mystery" (47). The comparison between Allie's father and the tiger has already been noted.

11. Although Will is looking for a "sign" in the cave and seems not to recognize his own ability to symbolize, he does note the difference between himself and the tiger (202). Likewise, in his essay "Naming and Being," Percy interestingly uses a comparison between a man and a tiger to illustrate the uniquely human capacity to symbolize, a capacity which the members of the society in which Will lives seems to have forfeited:

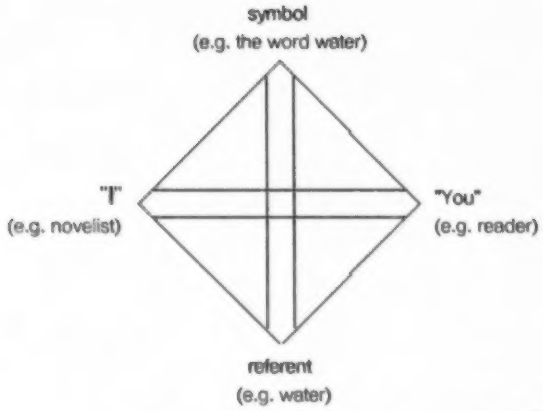
> A tiger is a tiger, no more, no less, whether he is a sick tiger or a flourishing tiger. But as soon as an individual becomes a name-giver or a hearer of a name, he no longer coincides with what he is biologically. Henceforth, he must exist either authentically or inauthentically. An organism exists in the biological scale of flourishing-not-flourishing; a person exists in the normative scale of flourishing-not-flourishing (Signposts, 134).

12. As Sibelman points out (747, 749), an author may readily portray a character's loss of childhood innocence and subsequent recovery of identity (signified by a renaming), by drawing on the Dialogue of Peniel (Genesis 32: 23-33) as a source. Likewise, Will's childhood loss of innocence at the hands of his father is regained after he comes out of the cave and regains his ability to "name" or symbolize with Allie.

13. The progression in Will and Allie's relationship may be traced if one simply notes the number of times the word silence or some such term is mentioned, for example, within the space of the few pages proceeding Will's falling into the greenhouse: "his heavy clothes were ... silent" (217); "Silence takes root, sprouts" (219); "With him, silence didn't sprout" (229); "He was silent" (232); "a penultimate hush" (234); "he fell silent" (236); etc. These silences are described in a positive way, and build up to a kind of verbal climax on pages 237 - 238.

14. There has been "extravagant disagreement" amongst critics as to the plausibility of Allie and Will's communication, and as to their relationship in general (Crowley, 12). Crowley quotes one critic lamenting "how this extraordinarily gifted writer expects his readers to attend seriously to a conclusion in which Barrett and Allison get themselves a motel room and become lovers after a spate of dialogue whose inanity only underscores the improbability of all that has transpired to that point" (12).

15. The thunderstorm nevertheless provides the occasion for a kind of Second Coming. When ball lightning rolls toward Allie and Will down the center aisle of the greenhouse, Allie exclaims "Jesus Christ" (239). Other critics assert that Allie is Will's Second Coming (Ciuba, 402; Magaw, 84), or point out that Allie has come to language a second time (Pearson, 1987, 96). In any case, the lightning illuminates the greenhouse "like a diamond"; and we are told that Will's and Allie's bodies form a diamond (237). Elsewhere, Percy uses this same diamond shape to illustrate the tetradic process of intersubjectivity:



(Adapted from Signposts, 124, and Lost in Cosmos, 98. See also The Message in the Bottle, 259).

The diamond thus symbolizes the intersubjectivity Will and Allie attain; but at the time the lightning storm illuminates the greenhouse like a diamond, and as Allie exclaims, "Jesus Christ," Will is already "not listening" (239). Again, he seems ironically unaware of the significance of what has taken place between himself and Allie. He quietly taps out a tune on Allie's shoulder, which may be an oblique hint that he, like other Percy heroes, is in Kierkegaardian terms more interested in the musical-erotic than in transcending the aesthetic sphere, and so exists in aesthetic damnation.

16. This passage is a parody of the last verses of Revelation (22: 17ff.).

17. Father Weatherbee's one good eye nevertheless allows him to see more than others. In an essay Walker Percy says that it is almost impossible objectively to see language, that which itself forms our perception: "In order to see it, one must be either a Martian, or, if bemused, wounded, crazy, one-eyed, and lucky enough to become a Martian for a second and catch a glimpse of it" (MB, 29). Father Weatherbee is thus qualified in more than one way to diagnose the ills of society.

18. On the incest motif, see Susan Derwin (85 - 86, 89). Percy's interest in time in The Second Coming, as well as his portrayal of Will's father and his allusions to incest, may refer back to Faulkner's Quentin Compson in The Sound and the Fury (see Signposts, 164).

19. Again, critics disagree as to whether the novel is ambiguous or ambivalent. Malcolm Magaw asserts that Percy is "compulsively" ambivalent in The Second Coming (84). Doreen Fowler is of much the same opinion (13, 22). Ted Estress states that the novel is ambiguous, but ultimately "reassuring" and "affirming" (63). And finally, Michael Pearson states that it is "affirmative," not "shadowy" or "elliptical" (90, 99). Walker Percy himself said his novel is "not ambiguous" (Conversations, 204).

20. Tom also describes his therapy in terms of controlling the patient: "You control where you sit, where the patient sits or lies, who speaks, what is said. You even control the silences" (99). His idea of intersubjective communication between patient and doctor, then, is not as passive or clichéd as it sounds.

21. Tom is in this context describing his treatment of "Donna S.," a victim of incest. The Thanatos Syndrome is thus in a sense more optimistic than The Second Coming in that in the latter novel incest remains always as a dark, inexpressible factor in the lives of the protagonists. However, in his last novel Percy turns the unspeakability of child abuse around, so to speak, by making it inexpressible according to the rules of propriety in society. As we shall see, in this way Percy exposes the banality of evil.

22. Percy differentiates between the form and substance of language in his two characters, Hudeen and Chandra. While Hudeen's speech has all the form of language, it has little meaning or substance; but the rude and outspoken Chandra, who pays attention to few of the social forms of communication, means everything she says (41).

23. The azimuth is used to triangulate the coordinates of a forest fire, and is a symbol of intersubjective, I-object-you relationships. According to Father Smith, euthanasia is the taking of another's life and is thus the most blatant breach of this relationship.

24. Patrick Samway points out that Father Smith's Confession and Footnote do not appear in the holograph manuscript or first typescript of The Thanatos Syndrome (in Gretlund and Westarp, 125). Percy added them only later, thinking the theme of the novel needed clarification and elaboration. Percy himself was in Germany in 1934, and experienced many of the things he places in Father Smith's account.

25. Father Smith says at the end of the novel: "Never in the history of the world have there been so many civilized tenderhearted souls as have lived in this century. Never in the history of the world have so many people been killed." This passage echoes what Percy elsewhere says about the banality of evil in the present age: "The triumphant secular society of the Western world, the nicest of all worlds, killed more people in the first half of this century than have been killed in all of history" (MB, 105).

26. Percy said in an interview that this is the part of the novel he enjoyed most writing (McCombs, 811). He also recognized the danger "of having comedy juxtaposed with high seriousness" (823). In an interesting article that analyzes comedy in The Thanatos Syndrome, Robert Hughes points out the fine balance between horror and humor at the novel's climax, and states that in comedy it is common for the antagonists to receive an embarrassing punishment, whereafter the story ends with a ritual kind of revitalization and rebirth (6 - 8).

27. This easy dismissal of a once formidable enemy of Tom is again done satirically. After the idealistic scientist realizes that his own son could have been a victim of child abuse because of the scientific project he himself was responsible for starting, Bob Comeaux is struck "silent" and the words of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" (a subject of his earlier panegyric on the social benefits of science) is heard through the window (359, 360).

28. See Tom's observation on Canadians, for example (367 - 68). It seems as though, by dwelling in detail on the lives of even minor characters, Percy was trying to create a sense of community at the end of his novel. In his previous novels, his protagonists' social lives extended only as far as their few friends or family members, and his minor characters remained rough sketches only.

29. McCombs, 819. About Tom's spiritual state at the end of the novel Percy said: "You can make what you like out of it and you can be as right or as wrong as I am" (814).

CONCLUSION

Truly I say to you ... the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force.

Matthew 11: 11,12 (RSV)

In *The Genesis of Secrecy*, Frank Kermode differentiates between interpretation and "divination":

> the most naive reading of a text, that treats it, for example, as a transparent account of reality, and picks up only the clues that enable it to satisfy the most conventional expectations, say of coherence and closure, is an interpretation. A reading at the next level, which is as spiritual to carnal, perceiving to seeing, understanding to hearing, calls for divination: violence or cunning ... (6).

We have seen how Percy practices a kind of cunning and violence on his readers, telling us what we may not necessarily want to hear, but more often *not* telling us what we *want* to hear. It may also be said that extracting meaning from Percy's fiction requires an equal amount of cunning and violence on the part of the reader -- that is, it requires what Kermode calls a "spiritual" reading. Such a reading may yield only "the momentary radiance that attends divination" (45); but then, one moment of insight into a writer's work may be worth a lifetime of interpretation.

Percy himself would have described this moment of insight or divination as a creation of community between writer and reader, a meeting of two selves who are in the same predicament:

> The artist, caught in the predicament of the self, is at once more vulnerable to the predicament of self than the nonartist and at the same time privileged to escape it by the transcendence of his art. He serves others who share his predicament by naming it.... The naming of the predicament of the self by art is its reversal. Hence the salvific effect of art (*Lost in the Cosmos*, 120, 121).

The predicament of self -- its essential nothingness without other -- is thus transcended through the naming or through the "signs" of the work of art, but only briefly: "After a while, both the artist and the self which receives the sign are back in the same fix or worse -- because both have had a taste of transcendence and community" (*Lost in the Cosmos*, 121). The brevity of the intersubjective relationship between reader and writer, Percy says elsewhere, does not testify to the deficiency of the artist but to the validity of Kierkegaard's idea of the aesthetic stage, which can offer no lasting self-transcendence (*MB*, 97).

The way in which Percy dealt with the essential limitation of his art was by writing about religious matters; but Percy's definition of "religious" is interesting: "I use the word 'religious' in the root sense of signifying a radical *bond*, as the writer sees it, which connects man with reality ..." (*MB*, 102).[1] For Percy this bond with reality entails living one's life as a "wayfarer," as one who always lives with the imminence of catastrophe in the paradise that modern humankind has constructed for itself. The hero of the Percy novel is thus "a new breed of person in whom the potential for catastrophe -- and hope -- has suddenly escalated" (*MB*, 106, 112). Percy's hero is a man in a predicament. He lives in a scientific society in which "nothing is easier than to fall prey to a kind of seduction which sunders one's very self from itself, into an all-transcending 'objective' consciousness and a consumer-self with a list of 'needs' to be satisfied" (*MB*, 113). This monstrous bifurcation of human beings into "angelic" and "bestial" components is what Percy's heroes constantly struggle against as they teeter over the abyss separating the two.

This same dialectic reflects Percy's art, which struggles to transcend the immanence of the physical words on the page. The "new novelist," he says, is likely to be a person "teetering on the brink of the abyss," or worse, a person "who is already over the brink and into the abyss" (*MB*, 102). Faced with a vocabulary which used to signify the possibility of transcendence -- with words like God, grace, salvation, etc. -- but which now is largely defunct, the only option left for the novelist is to practice a kind of "violence" and "cunning" upon the reader -- to speak when one is expected to remain silent, and to remain silent when it is most desired that one speak. The purpose of the novelist, however, is always to engage the reader in the intersubjectivity of the text -- "to set forth with a stranger in a strange land where the signposts are enigmatic but which he sets out to explore nevertheless" (*MB*, 102).

In spite of, or perhaps because of the violence and cunning of Percy's fiction, the reader engages in his heroes' predicaments to the extent that the reader, too, is in a predicament. Part of the reason Percy saw his heroes as "hopeful" is that he believed catastrophe to be so near. The denizens of this present age who have come to the end of scientific theory and consumption have two options: they "can become so frustrated, bored, and enraged that [they] resort to violence,"

violence upon themselves (e.g. drugs, suicide) or violence upon others (murder, war); or they may discover that they are "open to a search for signs, some sign other than theorizing or consumption" -- that is, they discover that they can become wayfarers, individuals "open to signs" (*Signposts*, 312, 314). Yet the reader will not likely make the latter discovery unless he or she experiences an ordeal, whether it be through the violence of the former option (war, death, etc.) or vicariously through the protagonists in Percy's novels. For only through catastrophe, the possibility of an imminent end, can language be renewed (*Signposts*, 306).

It is this sense of an ending and a beginning which is conveyed in the "violence" of Percy's language and silence. Percy spoke of "the old authentic thrill of the Bomb and the Coming of the Last Days," less with foreboding than with a certain degree of anticipation (*MB*, 84). Thus, at certain times in his novels what Percy called "the ineffable sociability of writing" (*Signposts*, 200) fades into the background of what can only be described as an overpowering sense of imminence. We have seen how, at times, the language or silence used to convey this imminence in his texts may alienate the reader rather than draw him or her into the novel. But usually, silence and language work off one another in Percy's fiction to negate the excesses of either one. This balance is most clearly seen in *Lancelot*, which is in a sense a corrective to the "ranting and raving" in *Love in the Ruins*. In each of Percy's novels, however, the shock of recognition that the reader sometimes experiences is largely attributable to the co-existence and co-determinacy of the silence and discourse in the text: Binx's silence before his aunt's eloquent advocacy of outdated ethics in *The Moviegoer*; Will's search for an answer from Sutter and from Father Weatherbee at the endings of *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*; Tom More's antic and grandiose searching in *Love in the Ruins*, and his ironic interrogations of Father Smith in *The Thanatos Syndrome* -- these are predicaments which we may all experience in "real life." Percy's fiction is "religious" in the sense that it binds us to an ultimate concern with the nature of humankind and the nature of reality -- immanence and transcendence, death and life, catastrophe and hope, speaking and silence. And to the extent that Percy's novels succeed in portraying reality, he has also succeeded in his goal of "delivering religion from the merely edifying" (*Signposts*, 306).

Now that Walker Percy's fiction is fast becoming a part of the canon of American literature, interpretation of his writing is in danger of undergoing what Frank Kermode has called "a familiar transition from the charismatic to the institutional" (*The Genesis of Secrecy*, 49 - 50). "Institutional" interpretation is interpretation and no more; it is a closed, conventional reading of a text which pays little attention to its complexities or ambiguities. For some time now, it has been common for critics to speak of the ambiguities of Percy's fiction, or the complexities of his style. But these observations, the more we say them and the more they are accepted, will most certainly and ironically become cliché, something Percy worked against throughout his writing career. A "charismatic" reading of Percy, however, is accomplished with a certain degree of divination, with brief moments of revelation through which one may extract some meaning from both the language and the silence of the text. This reading requires violence and cunning, methods with which Percy was not altogether unfamiliar.

NOTES - CONCLUSION

1. According to this definition, Percy identifies both Flannery O'Connor and Jean-Paul Sartre as "religious novelists" (MB, 114).

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